"GONNEGTIONS"

THE U.S. IN VIETNAM IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

This Thesis analyses the form and content of the US' re-examination of its involvement in Vietnam. Commencing in the late 1970's this "coming to grips" with Vietnam is widely perceived by cultural institutions within the US as a confrontation with some of the darker aspects of its history. Vietnam Vets, once beyond the pale, have gained a new recognition based on an acceptance of the re-adjustment problems which they faced as a result of the effects of heavy combat. The US is also widely perceived as being a changed nation after Vietnam: there has been a breakdown in social and foreign policy consensus, and Americans are now a lot warier of foreign intervention.

However there is enough evidence to suggest that this "New America" is no more than skin deep. The confrontation with history is taking place in a cultural context that is characterised by a new sense of national pride, with an affirmation of US history as one of its major characteristics. As far as foreign policy is concerned the influence of Vietnam seems to have altered only the character of military intervention abroad without changing a fundamental US willingness to arbitrate in the affairs of other countries - by force if necessary. Overall, the resurgence of interest in the period of the Vietnam War seems to be less a confrontation with the past than an attempt to incorporate a "difficult" period in US history within a set of traditional US myths and cultural processes.

The key to understanding the US relationship with Vietnam is an awareness of US' culture's unwillingness to acknowledge its own changing structure in anything more than a superficial manner. The Introductory

chapter discusses US culture within the framework of the development of a postwar, postmodern cultural environment. This section demonstrates that although the cultural processes of the US may be postmodern, the cultures perception of itself continues in the vein of an unproblematic modernism. The Second section, "Mentioned in Dispatches" discusses Vietnam's relationship to postmodern culture as expressed in Michael Herr's Dispatches, with special emphasis on communication and representational theory. "Revelations - Revaluations" explores some of the literature written by Vets and the way in which US culture is trying to incorporate their experience, and the experience of Vietnam in general, into a wider traditional cultural description of itself. "We Gotta Get Outta This Place..." looks at the phenomenon of the Vietnam film and its relationship to the production of film since the Vietnam war and to wider issues of the modes of cultural representation.

His nostrils turned to me in an interested way. 'I understand you're looking for a business gonnegtion.'

The juxtaposition of these two remarks was startling. Gatsby answered for me:

'Oh, no,' he exclaimed, 'this isn't the man.'

'No?' Mr Wolfsheim seemed disappointed.

'This is just a friend. I told you we'd talk about that some other time.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Mr Wolfsheim, 'I had a wrong man.'

Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby.

She stared at it in wonder. It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process. It astonished her to think that so much could be lost, even the quantity of hallucination belonging to just the sailor that the world would bear no further trace of. She knew, because she held him, that he suffered DT's. Behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare. The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is that the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost [...] "dt" God help this old tattooed man, meant also a time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was, where it could no longer disguise itself as something innocuous like an average rate; where velocity dwelled in the projectile though the projectile be frozen in midflight, where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick. She knew that the sailor had seen worlds no other man had seen if only because there was that high magic to low puns, because DT's must give access to dt's of spectra beyond the know sun, music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright.

Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49.

INTRODUCTION

FRAGGING

Once upon a time...

There may have been a time when it was that simple. When to utter that statement was to assume a narrative detachment that was literally unquestionable; to draw boundaries and lines of de-marc(k)ation between myth and history, art and criticism, fact and fiction; to delineate a previous time, a past that was clearly different - other - than the time frame that contained the writing; a past suspended outside the frame and anterior to the present moment by the introduction of spatial unities into a linear temporal flow (Once upon a time...). There was a time....

For even as the argument still rages over whether there is something that can properly be called postmodernism, the debate is shot through with the realisation that we have somehow, somewhere entered a new age, or at least another age; concepts which were once taken for granted are now at the very least regarded as extremely problematic. Much of this heightened awareness stems from what has been called the "crisis of representation", the calling into question of the claims of authenticity and realism that are made by and for mimesis and interpretation. One of the more obvious results of this interrogation of representational ideologies has been a liberation from - or a corruption of, depending on your point of view -the distinction between primary art and secondary criticism. Some critics have argued that this new para-literary post-criticism has resulted from a break with tradition, prompted by the

application of the techniques of modernist art to critical analysis,[1] but it must be remembered that the modernist' break with representation was a break only with certain forms rather than with the concept of a representational truth.

The position that this postmodern culture has emerged out of a radical break or rupture is itself a reflection of the modernist belief in the transformative power of crisis and transgression, exemplified by the ideals of the avant-garde. Similarly, the position of radical post-structuralism, which claims to have emerged from this break and argues that narrative unity, representational realism and an autonomous self never existed (other than as bourgeois illusion), serves only to negate this idea of a rupture by implying a form of continuity, an ersatz narrative tradition. Obviously a change of some sort has been effected and the notion of crisis must be re-interpreted, in the way in which Berman posits crisis as an ongoing mechanism of history, the very possibility of its transformation, rather than a singular event. Thus, to be Modern:

> is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air.[2]

Postmodernism describes this type of cultural environment and is thus a word already straining under misappropriation and overuse. It can be re-invoked here not to describe a culture that is beyond the modern (that is impossible - at least as we now perceive things) or even necessarily beyond the variety of cultural formations labelled "modernism", but in order to convey the sense of a culture living very fast, tearing itself apart and recreating itself anew simultaneously, almost <u>as if</u> culture were living beyond itself in dense combinations of aspiration and frustration.

It would seem that the crisis intensified, or reached a new level, when we moved almost imperceptibly into the so-called post-industrial age

which, as Jameson convincingly argues, is not post-industrial at all, but the most perfect realisation thus far of the mechanisms of Capitalism.[3] Post-indstrialism "commences" in the Thirties and Forties where Capitalism develops new avenues of communication and new means of processing information and people (the passenger plane, the expansion of radio, radar and primitive computers) and gathers momentum during the post-war period. The 'fifties, which saw the intensification of the cult of the image (based upon the heightened scope effectiveness and power of the electronic media) and the rise of consumerism further eroded the stability of representational forms by undermining the crucial distinction between subject, object and audience and replacing it with the commodity, which has no need of representation.[4] As Baudrillard demonstrates,[5] the object never completely gives up its secret, retaining a familiar alterity, while the commodity is always completely readable, manifesting a visible essence which is its price. It is not then a question of a break with representation as much as representation slowly collapsing in upon itself, its limits being internalised, its internal contradictions slowly moving outwards to colonise its surroundings.

Further evidence for Berman's model of a "crisis of gradual transformation" is provided by the diversity of forms, practices and theories that come under the umbrella of postmodernism, each of which has emerged in reaction to a specific aspect of high modernism. In many cases the modernist form continues to exist side by side with the newer forms: the diversity of critical styles, for example, guided by an older hermeneutic tradition, indicates that post-structuralism has not carried the day yet. It is difficult at any rate to see how a form could emerge in reaction to another without internalising at least some of the characteristics of its object, and this also militates against a radical break with the past. The Sixties, often targeted as the period of the

break, is rather, where the mechanisms (or lack of) of post-industrialism are becoming more pronounced, emerging at the level of national political and social culture rather than as a series of local reactions to specific cultural forms such as abstract painting; the system beginning to quake as contradiction, paradox and instability come into conflict with older values of unity and solidity.

This suggests that what is called postmodernism is a superposition of two cultural/historical periods where the result is not a gradual replacement of older modernist forms but a side by side, simultaneous existence with these forms where the relationship between the two is an ambiguous, unstable mix of nostalgia, prophesying, exhilaration and despair. Postmodernism is both a distinct cultural phenomena and inseparable from older cultural forms. So much that is labelled postmodern is convoluted (even involuted) and paradoxical because it itself is so. Postmodernism is a description of the complex situation achieved when narrative periodisation fails completely - it is also that which causes it to fail. Yet there remains a force in the events themselves; a powerful tendency to collapse diversity into narrative that resides as much in the culture as in the illusive reality of exterior allusions.

The period of the Vietnam war is either implicitly or explicitly regarded as a crisis of postwar US culture, often as the crisis. Within this perception one can already see the beginnings of a modernist narrative taking shape. For Vietnam is seen as somehow causing the crisis rather than as the effect of a violent intermingling of postmodern and modernist values: the Vietnam issue polarized society, defeated the Poverty programs, abetted the evolution of a more permissive and unstructured society, destroyed a sense of tradition.... It is this modernist perception of the singularity of the moment of crisis that is called into question by the events of the Sixties. Rather than representing the crisis the Sixties

gives way to a period of successive crises that runs from the oil shocks through the Iranian hostage drama to the October '87 Stockmarket crash. Even the current re-examination of the US role in Vietnam has been presented as a crisis: the US facing up to the dark deeds of its past. This indicates that US culture has become increasingly dependent upon the notion of a singular crisis for its perceptions and representations of itself. Despite a recent history littered with "crises" US culture accepts that the Vietnam war was the turning point in US history; an acceptance that also conceals a denial. It is a turning point that is seen largely in terms of a resolution of many of the disturbing aspects of a postwar, postmodern culture. The fact that nothing has been resolved is concealed through the presentation of the Sixties as calling into question only various aspects of the culture, rather than being symptomatic of a more problematic uncertainty about cultural representations and the way in which the culture constructs itself. By concentrating also on a narrow period of US history, the present cultural discourse masks the existence of a larger cultural narrative into which into which the Vietnam war is rapidly being incorporated.

US history has proceeded, perhaps even progressed through a series of major wars as well as a number of more minor armed interventions in areas of the world, particularly Central and South America. Each of these wars can be seen to accompany significant developments in the evolution of the US as a nation and to understand the traumatic importance of Vietnam it is necessary to comprehend the sense of affirmation that had always seemed to result from the US armed dealings with the rest of the world, before its involvement in Indochina. The early settlers were in almost continuous, conflict with Indian tribes in a struggle for land and resources that was often unfairly weighted in favour of the new arrivals who, when all else

failed, had numbers at work for them. This conflict with the indigenous peoples of North America is an almost uninterrupted undercurrent in US society for the next 200 years. Settled for nearly 150 years, US independence is achieved through armed conflict: first, as British colonists the American settlers throw off French Colonialism in the French and Indian Wars of 1763; then as Americans they throw off British Colonialism in the War of Independence.

The War of 1812 then is really unfinished business arising from the Revolutionary War; the war with Mexico, displays the US unswerving determination to become a coast to coast nation, even if it means confiscating half of Old Mexico to do it. The Civil War forcibly settles the US internal arguments: amongst the outcomes and possible motivations for the war are the certainty that the future United States will, firstly, be just what it says; secondly, that it will possess a primarily urban/industrial, as opposed to rural/agricultural character; and thirdly, that it will at least pay lip service to the rights of Man. The rest of the century is therefore characterised by a separate culture in the South, and uneasy coexistence between agriculture and industry and the development of institutional racism at the same time as the US' newly heightened military powers are turned against the Indians with renewed ferocity.

The Spanish-American war of 1898 ushers in the new century and is thus full of significance. Firstly, it demonstrates how economically, and therefore militarily powerful the US has become; secondly it is a war in which the role of the press is vital in ensuring support for the war effort by helping to create a particular image of the war in people's minds; most importantly, it reflects an early perception of an imperialistic development of US capitalism, its tightening hold over Latin America and its further expansion into Asia. The emergence of the US as a world power was further confirmed when the US broke with over one hundred years of

traditional non-direct involvement in European affairs to fight on the side of the allies in World War I.

The Second World War not only served to lift the US out of the Depression but to confirm its emergence as the industrial and military power in the arena of world politics, a role that is reflected in the plethora of alliances that it initiates in the years immediately following the war. What this entails can be gleaned from the US description of its role in Korea as a "police action". Being the most powerful equates with being the most authoritative, and part of authority is the privilege to decide what is right and wrong - something that the US had been doing on a lesser scale in Latin America for over a hundred years. In terms of capitalist pragmatism, being Policeman of the world enables the US to safeguard a very widely spread net of vested economic interests, but in moral terms it puts the US in the position of arbiter of the world's problems. There is the assumption that its democratic tradition will enable it to decide what is in a country's best interests - even if these interests are not always seen to be separate from those of the US. Although there surface some worrying trends with regard to information, war reporting and military strategy, Korea is widely perceived by the US as a defeat for the arch-rival, the USSR.

On a cultural level then, wars have always provided Americans with a sense of achievement and self-definition; they have always been perceived as advancing the cause and development of the United States as a nation. The US always won its wars and the creation of "purpose" and "results" is one of the spoils of victory.

Until Vietnam.

Jameson, in "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" discusses Vietnam as America's first postmodern war, but doesn't make clear what he means by this. Certainly there exists a widespread feeling amongst

Americans and non-Americans alike, that Vietnam was somehow a "different" war - if only because it was the first war that the US ever "lost". Was the outcome different because the character of the conflict was different? Many observers point to the massively ineffective displays of US firepower, the confusion and savagery of the fighting, the nature of guerilla warfare. But the latter stages of the World War II Pacific campaign bore many similarities to Vietnam: days of naval bombardment reducing tiny atolls to rubble but failing to reduce the number of defenders which had to be eliminated in close fighting, sometimes in thick jungle. Veterans' accounts of the fighting on Tarawa, Okinawa and Iwo Jima record battles as savage as anything from the worst moments of Tet. All of which is to say that Vietnam cannot be reduced to the specificity of its killing technology.

What had changed was the cultural situation of the US, indeed of the West as a whole, where an emerging postmodern culture had gradually altered the whole context of international conflict. In many ways Vietnam can be regarded as a postmodern paradigm; it cannot represent a total organising concept for in a very real sense, the word, like the country, is absent to our perception; it has become overused, exhausted and overloaded, too charged with meaning - capable of representing so much that it represents nothing: "After enough time passed and the memory receded and settled, the name itself became a prayer, coded like prayer to go past the extremes of petition and gratitude: Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, say again until the word lost all its old loads of pain, pleasure, horror, guilt, nostalgia".[6] And like prayer, the word retains its power, but the universality of its meaning has disappeared inside a cavernous subjectivity. The language that whirls around Vietnam is such a bewildering mix of Western, particularly US, values, cultural perceptions and justifications, that Vietnam has become too large to comprehend in its entirety - in the same way that US

culture possesses a diversity and variability that baffles any attempt to incorporate it into definitive statements.

Even more important than the aspect of Vietnam as paradigm is the dialectical relationship between US culture and the events in South East Asia. Stated all too reductively, this means that Vietnam (the war, the actions, the "idea") was derived from, but also aided in the evolution of a postmodern culture. Michael Herr seems to suggest as much in Dispatches when he says:

> Out on the street I couldn't tell the Vietnam Veterans from the rock and roll veterans. The Sixties had made so many casualties, its war and its music had run power off the same circuit for so long they didn't even have to fuse. The war primed you for the lame years while rock and roll turned more lurid and dangerous than bullfighting, rock stars started falling like second lieutenants; ecstasy and death and (of course and for sure) life but it didn't seem so then. What I'd thought of as two obsessions were really only one. I don't know how to tell you how complicated that made my life. Freezing and burning and going down again into the sucking mud of the culture, hold on tight and move real slow.[7]

The intermingling of rock 'n roll and war metaphors indicates that Vietnam is not merely a problem of history, or foreign policy, or politics, or capitalism, but of all of these constituted in the larger field of culture. To select any one style of narrative to impose upon the Vietnam experience is to emerge with the complaint that Vietnam doesn't make sense; this statement uttered as if it were the result of a failure of communication, shows that Vietnam raises a representational and interpretational problem. The problems only become worse if one tries to understand only the content of the "message" that Vietnam is widely perceived to embody, rather than examining the medium, or indeed accepting that there may be as many "messages" as media.

This fascination with what is being represented, at the expense of the manner of its representation, permeates the resurrection of the debate about US involvement in Vietnam. We are told that after a decade of

silence, the US has embarked on a "healing" process that involves it confronting not only what it did in Vietnam, but what it did to its own citizens, in the form of the soldiers who fought there: it is, we are told, the US confronting its history. But in amongst all the "white noise" of the documentaries, films, plays, poems, novels, courses in Vietnam studies and so on, there is the experience of a profound silence; the sheer volume of textual itself output has a levelling effect on any critical discourse about Vietnam as everyone rushes to give voice to what was apparently repressed. The silence has fallen most heavily over the moral, political and (other) ideological questions raised by events in Vietnam - precisely those areas, ironically enough, about which there has been most discussion.

This ideological exclusion abets a cultural bias which favours the role of apologist for US involvement. Films such as Platoon and Full Metal Jacket, curiously uncritical of involvement in themselves, run side by side with the latest Rambo and Missing in Action films, sagas of revenge in which a failed US past is turned into triumph; A 1985 Time article reporting on the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon notes that ROTC enlistments are 45% higher than in 1979; a whole fashion industry has emerged around the wearing of military paraphernalia; above all, the US in the 1980's has not shied away from further involvement: the Lebanon, Grenada, dogfights over the Mediterranean, followed by air strikes on the Libyan mainland, freedom fighters in Afghanistan, Contras in Nicaragua, warships in the Persian Gulf.

The current debate is, after all, taking place in the midst of a US culture which has under Reagan been imbued with a new nationalism and sense of historical purpose. It is important to note that both these ideals require that history be viewed as a continuity, a progression of events that is somehow outside the narrative frame which we use to describe them. This history is a structure that is built upon and reinforced by values of

objectivity and rationality; values that seem to make possible the perception of a definitive, ideologically circumscribed meaning to events, even an originary meaning that governs the nation's history. Consequently the current discourse on Vietnam is liberally (and conservatively) sprinkled with talk about what Vietnam "meant", the "lessons" that can be learned, the "forces of history" and so on. But the language of the debate and the political/cultural framework within which it is taking place indicate that the US is not really learning anything new from its reincarnation of its involvement in Indochina. Instead there is a re-working of the material, often re-stating older positions under the guise of a new foreign policy direction. What seemed an aberration, a national trauma, a period of time which unsettled traditional US perceptions of itself to the degree that the culture could not make sense of the events, is now being made "sense" of. This of necessity involves the incorporation of the US' Vietnam experience within a mythic and narrative structure with whose ideological assumptions its citizens are already familiar.

It is however a mistake to think that if those same historical perceptions failed once to make sense of the issue, they will be able to do so now. That the "problem" of Vietnam is a cultural problem is only implicitly acknowledged by the way in which the new look at Vietnam is being considered alongside a more general re-appraisal of the Sixties. However the examination of that decade seems to be proceeding largely through processes of appropriation and denial, indicative of the ambivalence with which US culture views the Sixties. The decade represents a highly charged period in US history and there appears to be a kind of discomfort that the energy has not been dissipated entirely. The Sixties was, amongst other things, a period of intense (if not always effective or sincere) criticism of the US, a time in which the US government hinted at

the facelessness beneath its many masks. While much of this criticism may have been naive, misguided and politically reductive, it was also characterised by an effort at self-critical appraisals of the culture and a distrust of received knowledge, authority and official truth. Because of its turbulence and also for ideological reasons there are many people who would prefer that the Sixties didn't come back. Hence culture invites us to revel in the spectacle of the Sixties, that sense of drama, expansiveness, of bold sweeping narratives, that serves to place us at one remove from the personal impact of many of the events. Culture also encourages a nostalgia for the Sixties: a period of musical greatness, a time when the US was going places, when the ordinary people were seizing control of their destiny.... By fixing our eyes in so mythic a fashion firmly on the past, nostalgia blinds us to the faults of the period, even as it distracts us from analysing our immediate surroundings. In the same way, through appropriation, artifacts of the Sixties are stripped of their specific associations with the Sixties and turned into items that are inscribed with a more general cultural identification. In this way US culture reinforces an image of the Sixties as an aberrant decade, distanced from us and made vague and fuzzy by the loss of any historical specificity. The mixed feelings about the decade contrast strongly with the belief that Vietnam, regarded in isolation from the Sixties, holds an essential truth about US experience.

The Vietnam War has become the US' Holy Grail. To find the significance of the War, to find its "meaning" will be to learn something fundamental about the US. This self-knowledge is widely perceived as something that the US has lost during the Seventies, and its re-discovery will empower it to act once again. The Camelot of the early sixties failed, and a succession of American Kings since then have been characterised by vacillation and impotence. But we no longer live in an

age where this sort of Arthurian legend is of substantial relevance. The modern "type" of the Grail Quest is rather that portrayed in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49[8]; a hermeneutic text that demonstrates the failure of hermeneutic criticism as it is outfaced by postmodern culture. As with Vietnam, Oedipa Maas' attempt to obey the instruction to Pierce Inverarity, to find the essential truth, leads only to an exponential multiplication of meaning and connection. The quest for the legacy of a single estate becomes the quest for the legacy, the meaning, of America as a whole. Oedipa finds that trying to clarify the inheritance of others, at least in a hermeneutic fashion, is to effectively sign the release on the critic's own disinheritance.

Rather than attempting to impose such a definitive coherence from without, Michael Herr's Dispatches operates from within the fragmentary collection of events and perceptions that inhabit Vietnam, in an attempt to show how that overdetermined cultural space that is "Vietnam" has come about. Dispatches uses ideas that are similar to those in Lot 49 with regard to textual proliferation and a communications field that is heterogenous and overdetermined. Herr argues that the significance and meaning of Vietnam eludes us because there are so many different meanings. Western contact with Vietnam has been characterised by attempt at textual interpretation to the extent that the object of the discourse has tended to be obscured by the discourse itself. In the course of US involvement this was abetted by the Armed Forces whose efforts at exerting control over Vietnam were as much linguistic and representational as military. Control meant definition and redefinition which was itself reliant on a history of interpretations that were subject to this same distortion. Dispatches is significant because it extends the critique of the possibility of the transpiration of truth through interpretation to the recognition that interpretation largely is a matter of narrative imposition. The form of

Herr's text is thus a recognition that cohesive, linear narrative, doesn't sort out the confusion as much as it is culpable in its creation.

It is this awareness that is being obscured, sometimes deliberately, in the creation of a cultural narrative that will incorporate the US' Vietnam experience. Literature written by Vets generally presents the experience of Vietnam in the form of a personal testimony that reveals an often painful encounter with the arbitrariness of meaning, the precarious nature of the self, the loss of the authority of traditional ways of perceiving and describing US culture. These novels have tended to be received as descriptions of the "Vietnam experience", rather than descriptions of an encounter with US culture that happened to take place in Vietnam. For the one thing that all the writers have in common, including Herr, is the sense that what was happening in Vietnam was not very different to what was happening in mainstream US culture; that the two, in fact, fed off one another. But these writers, with the exception of Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien[9] tend to believe that the one representational mode that is still capable of painting an accurate picture of its object is the form of the personal narrative, and this stylistic conservatism is easily appropriated by a culture that stresses individual objectivity as the basis of tradition and unity.

This is in spite of the fact that diversity and heterogeneity are the most obvious features of both the field of post-industrial (or multinational) capitalism and its postmodern culture. As Jameson argues: "in the decades since the emergence of the great moderns styles society has itself begun to fragment in this way, each group coming to speak a curious private language of its own, each profession developing its private code or idiolect, and finally each individual coming to a kind of linguistic island..."[10] The same fragmentation extended into the realm of

culture has served to undermine the notion of the autonomy of cultural production, such that:

> today art is regarded mostly as entertainment or spectacle (of interest to the public primarily as a financial item) and criticism as so many opinions to consume. In effect the bourgeoisie abandoned its own avant-garde artist and cultural experts (whose competence is now often dismissed if it does not fit the political agenda). Though federal governments may offer token support, art (at least in the United States) is today the plaything of (corporate) patrons whose relation to culture is less one of noble obligation than of overt manipulation - of art as a sign of power, prestige, publicity.[11]

Art has not been eliminated, subjugated or co-opted in the usual way: rather the sphere of culture has expanded into all aspects of social and economic life, to the extent that everything, as Jameson points out, from state power to the structure of the psyche, can be said to have become cultural in some way.[12]

Many cultural forms still exhibit a lack of awareness of this shift; none more so than film. For film that designates itself solely as entertainment, this lack of cultural awareness has been more or less a given. But it is also evident in films that try in some way to be critical of that which they are representing and this is significant in view of the fact that films on Vietnam, in particular Platoon and Full Metal Jacket, have been important catalysts for the discussion of Vietnam. Both films present the viewer with powerful images of the Vietnam "experience" but lack any acknowledgement of the problematic nature of representation or of the cultural values which their representations embody. This is particularly surprising given that they are dealing with an event which many people at the time perceived as being highly problematic not only with regard to the content of its images, but also the largely visual way in which they were represented. There is also the tendency to regard these films in isolation, separated out from the context of Hollywood's production since the Vietnam war. This may be a serious problem in that

the films do exhibit strong links with a strain of films - disaster movies and science-fiction films - that were offered during the seventies as a compensation for things having gone so drastically wrong with the American Dream. In the same way, the films of Kubrick and Stone turn their material into cultural spectacle in such a way that they tend to pacify their audience rather than challenge it. As is the tendency of most of the cultural production centred on Vietnam, both films tend to evoke just enough of an experience of Vietnam to enable it to mesh with existing cultural narratives.

This unwillingness of the US to come to grips with the implications of involvement in Vietnam is indicative of a larger unwillingness to acknowledge the cultural changes it has undergone since WWII. The cultural processes of the US may be postmodernist but the way in which the culture perceives itself, the ways in which it acts on that perception are consistently modernist and essentialist. The US currently feels itself to be in a position of economic and political strength and the imposition of older modernist assumptions about history and narrative seem capable, at last, of making sense of a problematic period in the US' past. But somewhere between the culture and its description the issue of US involvement in Vietnam is becoming lost amidst a lot of talk about its "significance" and "meaning", even as a wider sense of the US relationship to its history is increasingly manifested in perceptions of crisis and spectacle; the past and its evaluation viewed largely in terms of entertainment. This rationalisation of the problematic nature of Vietnam with traditional US assumptions about itself obscures the degree to which the questions raised by Vietnam are not merely those to do with morality or military intervention but those posed by the act of representation: how does the US perceive itself and, more importantly, how does its self-perception influence its perception of Others?

MENTIONED IN DISPATCHES

"There were 50 Marines on top of Sugar Loaf Hill. They had been ordered to hold the position all night, at any cost. By dawn, 46 of them had been killed or wounded. Then, into the foxhole where the remaining four huddled, the Japs dropped a white phosphorous shell, burning three men to death. The last survivor crawled to an aid station."

TIME magazine report on the fighting on Okinawa.
Quoted in William Manchester's Goodbye Darkness.

"Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened."

Told by a 4th Division Lurp to Michael Herr in Dispatches.

Michael Herr[1] is well aware of the attempts to textualise Vietnam that have accompanied Western contact with that country. These attempts have failed to arrive at an understanding of Vietnam that was not corrupted by the desire of Western cultural institutions to see Indochina as they wanted to see it. This imposition of a familiar alterity upon the Vietnamese was related to, or at least appropriated by, the forces of economic exploitation. By the time direct involvement on the part of the US commences in the 1950's, Vietnam is already a highly problematic cultural text, and the way in which the West has constructed the object "Vietnam" means that its attempts to understand Vietnam, and Indochina as a whole, is less a dialogue than a self-perpetuating discourse. This situation is further complicated by US involvement which brings with it the complexity of an evolving postmodern culture. It becomes a problem of the distortions imposed by representation itself, by the proliferation of communication channels that subvert representation's attempt to sustain meaning and a direct connection to the world. Dispatches functions as the closing

bracket on the period of US military involvement, even as it recognises that this closure is of little significance. It does not mark the end of the West's relationship with Vietnam, nor does it represent the clarification of postmodern processes in such a way that the "real" Vietnam can now emerge. If Herr's story is one bracket, the open bracket is the story of another correspondent: Graham Greene's The Quiet American.[2]

At first glance Greene's text seems less a study of Vietnam, than a story about the relationships between three people: Fowler, the narrator and a correspondent, Alden Pyle, the fresh-faced American who dabbles in covert operations, and Phuong, the lover of Fowler who is gradually "stolen" from him by Pyle. However the "eternal" romantic triangle, with its connotations of a closed system, is shown to be especially inappropriate in the context of Vietnam; the interrelationship of Fowler, Pyle and Phuong is shown to have an intensely personal aspect, but at the same time the three cannot escape the web of interconnections that characterise their involvement in Vietnam. Their actions and justifications cannot be separated from the ideological aspirations of others, the confusion of political corruption and the endemic violence that constitutes their environment. Even the eternal aspect of the triangle has become extremely problematic and one is given an assortment of signals: the triangular tragedy is fresh and important for all those involved, yet one is left with the sense of this very same tragedy being played out again and again, day after day, all over the country, all over the world; the idea of eternity is undercut by the figures of decay that fill the novel, the corrupting effect of the war, and the world-weary obsession with mortality displayed by the narrator. At the same time the text seems to evidence a Romantic faith in the timelessness of the Vietnamese landscape and of the people, a sense of the present conflict as just a brief, frantic blur, in the continuum of history.

Yet the idea of history as a continuum - together with its associated assumptions concerning objectivity, meaning and its corollary, judgement - is called into question, albeit indirectly. The Quiet American is portraying a specific historical moment[3] in the early Fifties. It is the period before Dien Bien Phu, where US influence is gradually replacing that of the French. But it is not simply one country picking up where the other left off - the US involvement is not only intensifying the conflict, it is altering its character, through the radically different perception of the situation that is possessed by the US. At this stage for the French it is largely a colonial war; they are trying to hold onto an imperial possession and the conflict in South-east Asia is seen to have very little significance outside the immediate region. For the Viet Minh, although the socialist influence has come to predominate the war is still very much one of national liberation. The Americans, of course, see things in a very different light, and Vietnam comes to represent part of the global struggle against communism. Regional factors are less important than the repercussions that "losing" Vietnam to the communists will have on the global political, and economic environment.

Within this framework the protagonists are not only characters but also symbolic types which embody the ideological values and styles of their countries. Thus Pyle's quietness, innocence, seriousness are not qualities that one normally associates with the stereotypical American. More representative of this perception of national type is perhaps the rough crudity of Granger, or the brash geniality of the US Economic Attache. The youthful energy and enthusiasm of Pyle are qualities associated with a young country whose penchant for isolationism has meant that its dealings with the rest of the world exhibit a lack of a sense of others' traditions, an emphasis on immediate problem-solving rather than a long-term commitment of resources, and a tendency to see things ahistorically because of this.

Thus Pyle exhibits a preference both for direct attempts at influence that masquerades as subterfuge, and for a frankness and honesty that conceal intentions far more effectively than the courtly and elaborate diplomatic rituals that mark relations between the French and British. Set against Pyle is Fowler, representing Old Europe and tradition. But this is a European tradition that Fowler acknowledges to be burnt out, exhausted. Fowler is declining sexually, and the onset of impotence is seen to typify the European presence[4]: Fowler knows that Phuong will leave him for Pyle, just as he knows that Pyle will run into trouble, but he is powerless to prevent either. Fowler is selfish; he only wants Phuong for sexual companionship in his approaching old age, in much the same way as the French seem to acknowledge that they are fighting a rearguard colonial action to hold onto something that was never really theirs.

The important difference between Pyle and the Europeans is that the latter are capable of acknowledging the true nature of their intentions. By contrast Pyle has only the best of intentions; he is, at one and the same time, self conscious and appallingly naive. If the Europeans are trapped within the specificity of their colonial mentality, Pyle trusts in generalisations and blunders into trouble armed with a profound unwillingness to take local circumstances into account, and an inability to comprehend the influence of history: Vietnam's as well as his own. As a symbol of US foreign policy, it is not that his enthusiasm and good intentions conceal evil motives: rather, he cannot see that this naive good faith leaves him open to other forces whose intentions are not so noble; likewise he fails to see how his moral philanthropy is built upon the self-interest of men like Granger (who is only in Vietnam for a cushy tour and "a piece of tail") and the Economic Attache - who makes sure that the French are kept fighting, while the Americans encourage Vietnamese industry, in order to link then with the US economy. Pyle <u>is</u> an innocent,

and innocence, as Fowler says, "is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm" (QA, p. 37).

The period of the early Fifties is thus a prelude to direct US involvement, and as Pyle lies face down in the mud under Dakao bridge the first consignment of US planes is being unloaded. Pyle's death would seem to be the death of American innocence, but given the substance of recent discourses on Vietnam and Latin America, US innocence seems to be of the sort that is not easily killed: an innocence so firmly implanted in the realm of ideas that it is impervious to experience. The early Fifties also sees the development in the US of a post-industrial, multinational form of economic organisation and the postmodern culture that permeates it. This helps to explain why the US goes from a dearth of foreign alliances before World War II, to the plethora of bilateral and multilateral aid agreements and defence pacts of which it is now a part. The ideological transformations behind this shift are complex, but at least part of the evolution of this view that American political interests now lay everywhere can be traced to the fact that its economic interests now lay everywhere also. Hence, Greene's book is set in the time in which US involvement is developing as a result of its postindustrial economic organisation and its fledgling postmodern culture. At the same time it is helping to form the postmodern experience of which it is a part. As Jameson says: "This whole global, yet American, postmodern culture, is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and horror."[5]

Cultural assumptions and formations ensnare the characters, especially the two men, as much as economic and political ones. Indeed it is the belief that culture can remain separate from other ideological formulations that misleads both men. This belief belongs to the colonial world,

where the corollary of economic exploitation was a belief in the imposition of cultural values from without; economics and culture were clearly distinguishable, yet worked side by side to impose an order and coherence upon their environment. This, however, is not the world of multinationalism. Both Pyle and Fowler adhere to these earlier colonial assumptions albeit in different ways. Pyle possesses an Enlightenment ideology that posits man as a rational actor, capable of thinking and acting according to logical principles, and being desirous of doing so. These logical assumptions, of course, are those that his culture defines as logical. From this perspective, if man acts logically and rationally then history, as an amalgam of men's actions, also proceeds in a logical, linear fashion, where every action will have a more or less predictable outcome. Thus it is an ideology that relies heavily on description of events, actions and outcomes in the past; the assumption being that historical processes come close to revealing innate truths about mankind which operate irrespective of cultural differences. But this is a view of history that is blind to its own narrative construction; because of this it is also blind to cultures that do not conform to the innate truths it supposedly reveals. As a result Pyle "never saw anything he hadn't heard in a lecture hall, and his writers and his lecturers made a fool of him. When he saw a dead body he couldn't even see the wounds. A Red menace, a soldier of democracy"(QA, p. 32). The "real" Vietnam eludes him; he checks everything back with York Harding whose theoretical models, based on the possibility of "engineering" change in other cultures, he attempts to translate into action irrespective of the culture environment of Vietnam, and in ignorance of the irrationality and self-interest of those who surround him.

Fowler seems to be the diametrical opposite of Pyle, yet the worldview of both men is predicated upon similar assumptions. Fowler recognises the dangerous futility of Pyle's ideas and is familiar enough

with the Vietnamese environment to know that preconceptions and theories that have been worked out and applied elsewhere are likely to be completely useless. Yet his cynical appreciation of human self-interest and greed is, like Pyle's "innocence", based upon a belief in objective analysis and appraisal. Pyle believes in his authors and lecturers because of their traditional status as detached observers and critics of a history that possesses its own objective reality: Fowler's cynicism accepts to an extent the relativistic nature of history, the degree to which it is inscribed by other people's ideas and outlooks, but retains his faith in the individual as a detached, critical observer:

> The human condition being what it was, let them fight, let them love, let them murder, I would not be involved. My fellow journalists called themselves correspondents; I preferred the title of reporter. I wrote what I saw. I took no action - even an opinion is a kind of action. [QA. p. 28]

Fowler is presented as the burnt out residue of European existentialism: the alienation of man from God now manifests itself as a cynical detachment from events. Human relationships are empty of understanding because humans are empty of belief: "Perhaps if I wanted to be understood or to understand I would bamboozle myself into belief, but I am a reporter; God exists only for leader writers" (QA, p. 60).

Fowler's involvement with Pyle however, sees his detachment begin to break down. Spending the night in a guard tower in enemy territory, he thinks he feels someone coming up the ladder, then realises he is too frightened to recognise that it is his own trembling shaking the ladder: "I had believed I was tough and unimaginative and all that a truthful observer and reporter should be" (QA, p. 107). This betrayal by his mind and body is a prelude to a much larger failure of his ideology. After a number of people are killed by a bomb constructed out of materials indirectly supplied by Pyle, Fowler knowingly lets Pyle go to his death; knowing also that Phuong will not be as well off with him as with Pyle.

With this comes the realisation that he is no longer the detached observer. "Suffering is not increased by numbers: one body can contain all the suffering the world can feel. I had judged like a journalist in terms of quantity and I had betrayed my own principles; I had become as engagé as Pyle and it seemed that no decision would ever be simple again" (QA, p. 183).

Greene's text has clear links to the concerns of Michael Herr's Dispatches even if the two texts are stylistically very different, and Herr refers to The Quiet American several times with the sense of a narrative connection[6]. The link between the two is that Greene is describing a distinct shift in Western culture, while Herr is writing from within that cultural shift. The narrators in each text are journalists and this is important because what is being addressed between the two is a shift not only in global political and economic patterns but cultural forms as well. Thus both men must confront information distortions and deceptions, and Greene's scene of the French military press conference is strikingly similar (even if his loyalties are not necessarily so clear cut) to Herr's descriptions of the farcical MACV briefings. For both narrators it is also a question of coming to grips with being engagé; incurring a loss of the distinction between the observer and that which they are observing. But the irony is precisely the fact that both men are discovering this fact. The two texts are written 30 years apart, yet Herr is making the same discoveries; if his perception of cultural change is perhaps more extensive because it embraces the question of style, it is still going over ground already covered by Fowler. This irony is already evident in The Quiet American: the Europeans are operating in an older cultural mode yet seem to have a sort of tired self-consciousness of their own motivations and the futility of their actions. On the other hand we see the Americans operating under a more complex economic/political/cultural regime, yet

blundering into similar mistakes in Vietnam. It is implicit in Greene's text that even though US culture may itself be characterised by a pluralism and a postmodern reflexivity not evident in European culture, the way in which Americans regard their culture is much less problematic, with a characteristic naivete, a certain innocence. The fact that Herr is only discovering this 30 years later speaks volumes about the accuracy of Greene's perception.

The focus of Herr's text is the breakdown in conventional notions of historical analysis and narrative organisation, due to their inoperability in an environment such as Vietnam and, by extension, within our culture as a whole. The concentration is on a different type of discourse, one that breaks with older forms by eliding what have heretofore been regarded as incompatible styles and methods. Dispatches self-consciously blurs the distinction between conventional history, fiction, biography and journalism in an attempt to produce, not a definitive History of Vietnam, but an alternative "history". The intention is not only to reveal the opposition between an official and a secret history of Vietnam, but also the dialectical interaction between Vietnam and the phenomena of postmodernism, especially in relation to the field of communications.

Dispatches is working against all those privileged representations that tried in their own way to suppress, or merely omitted, what happened in Vietnam; in particular, Herr's textual interpretation stands in opposition to the photographic attempts to "cover" the war. It is now something of a cliche to state that this was the first television war, but one needs to go further and realise that for most people this television spectacle was the war. Americans could see bombs dropping, villages burning, and Marines dying in the Highlands within hours of the pictures being taken. The television coverage of Vietnam was counterpointed by coverage of

dissent within the US; in each case the pool of images and their dissemination was supplemented by magazines and newspapers. The privileged position accorded these visual representations (partly historical but also amplified by the ease of association extended by film and TV) is such that people believed in the pictures; the pictures were how it really was over there/back here.

Which they were, but only in the most rudimentary sense, within the parameters of an unbridgeable gap between event and image. For in the photographic image there are very specific forms of repression at work. Herr recalls as a kid looking at war photos in LIFE:

> Even when the picture was sharp and clearly defined, something wasn't clear at all, something repressed that monitored the images and withheld their essential information. It may have legitimised my fascination, letting me look for as long as I wanted; I didn't have a language for it then, but I remember now the shame I felt, like looking at first porn, all the porn in the world. I could have looked until my lamps went out and I still wouldn't have accepted the connection between a detached leg and the rest of the body . . . . [D, p. 23]

The photographic image presents us with an illusion of reality only; its duplicity is to be found in that its contents seem to have an optical verisimilitude which places the image in the present, a very summation of the present moment. Roland Barthes calls this aspect the purely "denotational": the image is completely given over to the message and there is no trace of any secondary connotational message, the sense of "style" that characterises other representational forms. The press photo in particular is, however, highly connoted:

> on the one hand, the press photo is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors of connotation; while on the other this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is read, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs.[7]

The photograph remains analogous to reality, but in addition to a variety of connotational processes[8], there is a representational duplicity implicit in the photographic method itself that goes undeveloped by Barthes. The photo evokes a perceptual continuity, yet its discrete existence belies that same continuity. In fact the image "lies" in the past; it is a relic committed to chemical memory, no more than a second-hand recording. Herr makes this distinction between lived visual experience and filmic representation in another passage: "But you could fly up into hot tropic sunsets that would change the way you thought about light forever. You could also fly out of places that were so grim they turned to black and white in your head five minutes after you'd gone" (D, p. 17).

Herr's use of colour terminology here is quite deliberate. Not only does it invoke the radical difference between the two perceptual (and therefore representational states), but the use of black and white refers back to the photographic image. In contrast to the plurality of experience, the photographic image is seen to be locked in, reductive, a way of reducing the impact of traumatic events. Barthes speculates that a pure denotation may exist not at the level of the "realistic" and objective, but at the level of the absolutely traumatic image. Trauma represents "a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning".[9] But contrary to Barthes' hypothesis, what the traumatic photo does is precisely to invest the image with language (it is read like any other photo) and therefore with meaning.[10]

The incitement to reading and context is derived from the way in which the photographic format frames its object, providing the viewer with an implicit set of spatial co-ordinates, literally a frame of reference. The camera offers the viewer an organised privileged state of perception; it also legitimises that position and turns it, as Herr says in connection with the LIFE photos, into voyeurism. The photo/filmic image thus seeks to

trap its object - we speak of "capturing a moment" (this is the ideal) or "capturing a good shot" (the actual result - reality has escaped and we are left with an image that is real only within the parameters of photographic convention). The filmic image thus breaks the continuum of "reality" by abstracting a single moment and giving it heightened significance, making it stand for a whole variety of "missing" moments. When this is coupled with the editing of film "coverage" and the placement of the image within a variety of possible contexts (magazine covers, protest placards, etc.), we see that film cannot lay claim to being a representation of events that is more meaningful through an exact portrayal of its object. The camera <u>does</u> lie. All the time.[11]

These distortions and biases that are inherent in the camera gaze are even more pronounced, yet more deceptive, in film and video. Film is seen to be a closer analagon to reality because it reproduces motion; this is, of course, an illusion only, because the filmic image consists of a series of "stopped" (in the sense of both a halting and a blockage) moments of reality - it remains only "moving pictures". The distortions do not stop there. The ability to reproduce motion records movements instituted by the photographer: camera movement - jarring the camera and "travelling" shots provide a feeling of live action, low angle heightens dramatic effect, and so on - as well as such aspects as moving close-ups, focusing and aperture changes. All of this before the film even gets to the editing stage, at which time it is chopped and rejoined to suit what may be the very definite ideological requirements of TV news and documentary production.

Television is thus characterised by (and many of its programmes are predicated upon) this representational gap, but Herr acknowledges that the gap between image and experience was something that afflicted all communications processes in Vietnam:

> Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it. All it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding, taking its most obvious and undeniable history and making it into a secret history. [D, p. 175]

The problem was communication itself: there was too much of it. Because Vietnam was largely a guerilla war (although on an incredible scale) and therefore a type that the US military was not used to fighting , it was also an information war: information - of the enemy's whereabouts, disposition, support among the civilian populace, etc - aquired a priority over tactics, because it was more then ever the necessary precondition for their formulation. In a postmodern environment, it is not long before information starts to turn around and bite the hand that feeds; the aquisition and processing of statistical information starts to become confused with the achievement and securing of military objectives. For example, Herr comments that the infamous Search and Destroy operations were in fact just the opposite: unfocused, often massive destruction followed by an attempt to find numbers and bodies to fit the Kill Ratio narrative.

Introduce into this situation a news media which possesses technology and techniques of information aquisition and control whose potential is just starting to be realised, and suddenly, the air is thick with communication: numbers, jargon, buzzwords, acronyms, tactical representations, coded reports, and images to match. So there is enough information from Vietnam to fill magazines and broadcasts for the troops (intensifying the informational overload within Vietnam), and to glut every newspaper, magazine, TV and radio station in the US. And yet:

> in the back of every column of print you read about Vietnam there was a dripping, laughing death-face; it hid in the newspapers and magazines and held to your television screens for hours after the set was turned off for the night, an after-image that simply wanted to tell you at last what had somehow not been told. [D, p. 176]

This process of informational overload was of course in train before Vietnam, but Vietnam inherited and inflamed the process of fifties consumerism until it became the very condition of our existence. Jean Baudrillard discusses this change in relation to mass culture, but the point is also relevant to Vietnam:

> We are no longer part of the drama of alienation; we live in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene. The obscene is what does away with every mirror, every look, every image. The obscene puts an end to every representation. But it is not only the sexual that becomes obscene in pornography; today there is a whole pornography of information and communication, that is to say, of circuits and networks, a pornography of all functions and objects in their readability, their fluidity, their availability, their regularity, in their forced signification, in their performability, in their branching, in their polyvalence, in their free expression.
>
> It is no longer then the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication.[12]

This recalls Herr's comment that looking at war photos as a kid was like looking at first porn; in each case there is a fascination with what is traditionally hidden but seems to be made present.[13] Yet the meaning of the image remains hidden and this may be a result of the "forced signification" that Baudrillard talks about: the act of reading a photo is never innocent, and itself engenders the expectation of meaning; the absence of meaning in photos of death, paradoxically opens the photo up to a multitude of meanings, and the one, sacred meaning with which our society supposedly invests death, is lost.[14]

This ecstasy of communication evolved as a by-product of the elaboration of the media spectacle, where information becomes a product that has to be dressed up and sold just like anything else:

> Khe Sanh was famous, one of the very few place names that was recognised by the American public. Khe Sanh said "siege", it

> said "encircled Marines" and "heroic defenders". It could be understood by newspaper readers quickly, it breathed Glory and War and Honoured Dead. It seemed to make sense. [D, p. 88]

The process didn't start with Vietnam and it didn't stop with it. The sixties was a decade of spectacle, crying out for sensory overload and transcendence and getting it - only to have it return as nightmare and immanence in unexpected ways. The metaphor of information as product during this period is surely Watergate. The Senate hearings were predicated upon the belief that the more information that was uncovered - if we only had the tapes - the easier it would be to unravel the network of corruption. While people were talking about issues of surveillance and an imbalance between Presidential and Congressional information-gathering agencies, the whole episode was being turned into the most multifaceted, convoluted, protracted National soap opera communications spectacular ever devised.

The communications instability was culture-wide, inherent not only in its awesome spectacles but in the language of its most ordinary citizens. The men from the rural and urban ghettoes who constituted the majority of US soldiers in Vietnam brought with them their own language. "They were rough and wild and dirty, and they spoke a dialect that was geographically undiscernible, with minor variations of tone and pitch as if they had all been recruited out of the same small town. Groovy. Wow. Number One. Number Ten. There it is, man. A bust for your dust. What a bummer. But it don't mean nothing."[15] What makes this language distinctive is that it is so undistinctive. Existing as collections of street slang, movie quotations, sporting, car and sexual metaphors, it tends to substitute a grammar of stock phrases for a more elaborate vocabulary. Thus a limited amount of jargon can be applied to an almost infinite number of situations,

each coded so that the precise meaning is recognised only by a specific sub-group.

> There it is, the grunts said, like this: sitting by a road with some infantry when a deauce-and-a-half rattled past with four dead in the back. The tailgate was half lowered as a platform to hold their legs and the boots that seemed to weigh a hundred pounds apiece now. Everyone was completely quiet as the truck hit a bad bump and the legs jerked up high and landed hard on the gate. 'How about that shit,' someone said, and 'Just like the motherfucker,' and 'There it is.' Pure essence of Vietnam, not even stepped on once, you could spin it out into visions of laughing lucent skulls or call it just another body in a bag, say that it cut you in half for the harvest or came and took you under like a lover, nothing ever made the taste less strong; the moment of initiation where you get down and bit the tongue off a corpse. [D, p. 203]

On the one hand this use of stock responses seems to describe a moment that represents an epiphany of the Vietnam experience; on the other hand the precise significance of the moment is unknowable in anything more than a sense of raw power. This jargon is a language that is so universal, so repeatable, so capable of being used to signify everything that its significance is instead offered as a profound lack. If, as Derrida seems to suggest, one of the primary characteristics of writing (language) is its iterabiltiy (the possibility of its coded repetition), then this is a language widely spoken, that is founded not on a communication of information but the communication of iterability.

In addition to the language of middle America, Herr has also pointed to the way in which the military was a prolific inventor of words and phrases, based around acronyms and abbreviations. In an effort to make language precise and neutral, old contexts were ruptured to create new modes of expression that were often euphemistic to say the least.[16] The way the military used language had a lot in common with the language of middle America; its emphasis upon the value of information and efficient communication often seemed to place more emphasis on the passage of information, its gathering, transfer and display, than upon its actual

content. Thus it was a language that also tended toward "pure" iterability.

To this must be added the particular jargon of the large black and Hispanic contingents, as well as the pidgin language that evolved in communication with the Vietnamese, but was also used extensively by the soldiers: an uneven mixture of Vietnamese, English and French, liberally spiced with idiom from all three. All of which managed to create a manic proliferation of linguistic styles that seemed designed to keep reality, or perhaps the unreality of Vietnam at bay. There is also the extensive use of the word "fuck" which del Vecchio describes in a glossary entry as "along with Fucked and Fuckin -the most commonly used word in a GI's vocabulary other than the article a".[17] The proliferating use of "fuck" during wartime may reflect the strong links between sex and war, links that are often exploited in the soldiers training,[18] as well as the cultural commodification of desire through advertising. But profanity extends the possibility of adding a new dimension to language by virtue of its being, nominally at least, forbidden and repressed. It is the situation of pornography once again and, like the pornographic close-up, through repetition fuck loses any descriptive power it may once have had and flattens the language around it. Instead it becomes a free-floating grammatical unit, capable of being used as noun, adjective, verb, intensifier or combinations of all of these. Its meaning is unstable, oscillating between utterances and evidence of a much more extensive instability within the language.

In the early sixties, however, there remained a faith in the process of textual signification even if the content was sometimes suspect. So when America moved into Vietnam in a big way, trailing Coke cans and television cables, it possessed assumptions not only of its technological superiority but of the superiority of its culture and language. The

attempt to exert control through language was not merely a masque for control exerted through military power - the two were indistinguishable.

> It had been a matter of military expediency to impose a new set of references over Vietnam's older, truer being, an imposition that began most simply with the division of one country into two and continued - it had its logic - with the further division of South Vietnam into four clearly defined tactical Corps...even if it effectively obliterated even some of the most obvious geographical distinctions, it made for clear communication, at least among members of the Mission... [D, pp. 78-9]

Faced with a war it could not win, the military command structure created through language a war that it could win: a whirlwind of jargon that served to obscure reality through the imposition of a set of linguistic co-ordinates upon a war narrative that had little connection (the less the better) with any possible objective reality. It was a language that corresponded to the way the US military command wanted/needed to see the war, as much as it reflected the traditional Western assumption of the superiority of its language and culture and its necessary imposition upon existing indigenous cultural and linguistic references. The problem was, when language wasn't merely exhausted by overuse, the existence of communication for the sake of communication severed it from any meaningful relationship with reality.

> That fall, all that the Mission talked about was control: arms control, information control, resources control, psycho-political control, population control, control of the almost supernatural inflation, control of terrain through the Strategy of the Periphery. But when the talk had passed the only thing left standing up that looked true was your sense of how out of control things really were. [D, p. 45]

The fracturing of the assumed correspondence between signifier and signified yawns wide in the language of "incendigel", "containment", "Hearts and Minds", "Search and Destroy", "slicks", "MACV", "forward defensive modes", "Rolling Thunder", "discreet burst" and a thousand other

jargon terms - language turning back upon itself in a frenzy of disembodied desire.

Herr writes, he dispatches, because he believes that there is a story of many stories about Vietnam that has not been told. It is a story which needs a new way of talking about things, because the traditional narratives are, like many of those who went to Vietnam, back in the World and not making it. "The press got all the facts (more or less), it got too many of them. But it never found a way to report meaningfully about death, which of course was what it was really all about" (D, p. 173).

The unconventional nature of Herr's efforts becomes clear when Dispatches is compared with a text that offers a more traditional approach to the problem of history: William Manchester's Goodbye Darkness.[19] Written in the late seventies, both these books are an attempt to come to grips with the past from an individual perspective. The title Goodbye Darkness is reasonably specific; Dispatches, while the word means official communication, particularly military, also refers to a prompt settlement of business, and a putting to death. Herr and Manchester are men plagued by what is loosely called "survivor's guilt", now recognised by the therapeutic profession as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Herr from his experiences in Vietnam, and Manchester from his experience of combat in the Pacific during World War II. For both men it is also a recognition that Official History and Modern History are juxtaposed with a personal history that incorporates the other two in a new way, outside the totalizing function of either.

It is not a question of Dispatches being unconventional journalism, or radical history, but an effort to break apart such arbitrary categorisation. Manchester, on the other hand, is a long-serving member of the historical establishment, author of a "definitive" work,[20] and although he

recognises the existence of a "secret" history of the Pacific in World War II, the narrative paradigm that he uses is one of the oldest that we know: a quest for origins, for a return. For although Manchester is motivated, like Herr to an extent, by a profound sense of loss, he seeks to recover the origins of that loss and assuage it. To this end he returns to the Pacific and visits the sites of the great conflicts. A narrative of the events that shook these places mingles with Manchester's observations concerning the present state of the South Pacific and his personal experiences during the war, looking forward to his re-encounter with Okinawa where he was seriously wounded.

But there is a coherence here for Manchester. It lies in the fact of his journey back, the ordering structure of his personal narrative. And like all such narratives it must have a resolution. Standing on Okinawa's Sugar Loaf Hill, near the spot where he was left for dead, he comes to understand why he fought.

> It was an act of love. Those men on the line were my family, my home. They were closer to me than I can say, closer than any friends had been or ever would be. They had never let me down, and I couldn't do it to them. I had to be with them, rather than let them die and me live with the knowledge that I might have saved them. Men, I now knew, do not fight for flag, or country, for the Marine Corps or glory or any other abstraction. They fight for one another. Any man in combat who lacks comrades who will die for him, or for whom he is willing to die, is not a man at all. He is truly damned.[21]

The book evidences a modernist faith in the cohering power of memory, assuming that while a man may have been many men, his experiences are arranged more or less in layers that can be peeled away to get down to bedrock, that which has gone unexamined or been repressed. Manchester uses this to impose a temporal unity upon his experiences, to make connections, to make the dream disappear (another ancient narrative trope), to figure out what it was all "for" - a conventional historical exposition that when set against the fragmentation of both memory and experience and the

inseparability of past and present that the book reveals, only serves to show how unusable conventional historical precepts have become. Herr, on the other hand, is not interested in what it was for or even what it meant, but in how it was seen to be what it was.

The focus of Herr's endeavour is thus a revised attitude toward History. The concept of history as a linear organisation of real events - "facts" - into a rational narrative pattern is thrown into question in Dispatches by Herr's calling attention to the instability of communications mediums, with their ability to fragment events out of context. The processes of History are themselves culpable in the generation of this communications miasma, through their selectivity, and the degree to which Historical methodologies are reliant on the same processes of fragmentation and re-contextualisation.

> Straight history, auto-revised history, history without handles, for all the books and articles and white papers, all the talk and the miles of film, something wasn't answered, it wasn't even asked. We were backgrounded deep, but when the background started sliding forwards not a single life was saved by the information. The thing had transmitted too much energy, it heated up too hot, hiding low under the fact-figure crossfire there was a secret history, and not a lot of people felt like running in there to bring it out. [D, p. 46]

So Herr's experience of the shortcomings of conventional journalism in Vietnam has repercussions for the study of history; in an age of mass communications what is journalism today is history tomorrow. Lest we fall back into a Manchesterian rage for imposing order and coherence upon an environment that no longer operates by these rules (an effort that created many of the "omissions" about Vietnam in the first place) there is a need for a re-evaluation and a re-inscription of both the position of the reporting subject, and the discourse that is used, breaking down barriers to perception such as the ideological distinction between History and Journalism.

This necessarily forces Herr to acknowledge the ambivalence of his own position: "I never knew a member of the Vietnam press corps who was insensible to what happened when the words "war" and "correspondent" got joined. The glamour of it was possibly empty and lunatic; but there were times when it was all you had..." (D, p. 152). Herr sees the distortion that is being imposed here. The job of a "correspondent" is, as the word suggests, to make things correspond, to put two and two together and communicate the sum. But what if there is nothing to put together, or at least no way of doing so; and what if there are further distortions built into the process of communication?

"Correspondent" is also a power term, an appellation that puts the bearer of it in a privileged position vis a vis other people and reality. Dispatches posits instead a subjective pluralism, recognising that everyone is a correspondent. The voice that speaks via this text is not the authoritative discourse of Michael Herr, but a composite; stories told by everyone from Generals to civilians to the lowest grunt on the line; a proliferation of discourses, each with its own narrative mode, descriptive style and peculiar way of valorising reality. The term "story" says it all - what Herr has collected are a series of individual representations of "reality": as such, the distinction between what is truth and what is fiction comes to be seen as problematic. "War stories aren't really anything more than stories about people anyway" (D, p. 198).

There were two major obstacles facing the media in its attempt to "cover" Vietnam. The first was that the field of communications had already been laid out and down. Stepping out from a media saturated culture, every kid had seen a lot of war films, and whether in response to the informational free-for-all, or as an attempt to organise the chaos around them, many soldiers self-consciously assumed attitudes and postures inherited from war movies:

> As is frequently the case before an operation, we are filled with a "happy warrior" spirit and tend to dramatize ourselves. With our helmets cocked to one side and cigarettes hanging out of our mouths, we pose as hard-bitten veterans for the headquarters marines. We are starring in our very own war movie, and the howitzer battery nearby provides some noisy background music.[22]

Herr also comments about the way soldiers under fire would act like a guts-and-glory John Wayne in the presence of a camera. But the media personnel did not escape the effects of this cultural backgrounding either:

> We'd all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television City, years of media glut had made certain connections difficult....It was the same familiar violence moved over to another medium; some kind of jungle play with giant helicopters and fantastic special effects, actors lying out there in canvas body bags waiting for the scene to end so they could get up again and walk it off. But that was some scene (you found out) there was no cutting it.
> A lot of things had to be unlearned before you could learn anything at all, and even after you knew better you couldn't avoid the ways in which things got mixed, the war itself with those parts of the war that were just like the movies... [D, p. 169]

For Herr, the recognition of this sort of cultural inscription raises serious questions about the possibility of the objectivity upon which the formulation of "History" is seen to depend.

The other difficulty faced by the Press was the legitimation of that which many of them tried to criticise:

> Somewhere on the periphery of that total Vietnam issue whose daily reports made the morning paper too heavy to bear, lost in the surreal contexts of television, there was a story that was as simple as it had always been, men hunting men, a hideous war and all kinds of victims. But there was also a Command that didn't feel this, that rode us into attrition traps on the back of fictional kill ratios, and an Administration that believed the Command, a cross-fertilization of ignorance, and a press whose tradition of objectivity and fairness (not to mention self-interest) saw that all of it got space. It was inevitable that once the media took the diversions seriously enough to repeat them, they also legitimised them. The spokesmen spoke in words that had no currency left, sentences with no hope of meaning in the sane world, and if much of it was sharply queried by the press, all of it got quoted. [D, p. 173]

The points that Herr makes here are very important and in many ways are the substance of Dispatches. The assumption of objectivity in journalistic reporting has been under fire for some time. It is popularly believed that during the course of the Vietnam war, the US media was transformed from a passive, largely conservative institution, into one that was often highly critical of administration policy. In the minds of many military men there is the belief that the media were largely responsible for the US losing the war, because they stirred up dissent at home.[23] This is similar to the belief amongst many politicians that this same "radicalisation" of the Press was responsible for the malaise, and decline in political legitimacy during the 1970's - the fatuous belief, for example, that an innocent Nixon was hounded from office by Woodward and Bernstein.

Daniel Hallin examines this notion of an oppositional media in some detail.[24] He maintains that while it has been shown that critical coverage of events does generally result in more critical public attitudes and vice versa, there are a number of questions that need to be asked before this thesis can begin to be applied to coverage of the Vietnam war: how much of the coverage overall is favourable or unfavourable to political authority? is criticism directed at institutions or individuals? how does the critical element of coverage change over time? Hallin's analysis of a random sample of 779 TV broadcasts in the period from 1965 to 1973, does indeed show a marked increase in negative news coverage, especially after the Tet offensive of 1968. This is reflected in editorial comments on major actions, criticism of democracy in South Vietnam and reportage of the low morale of US troops. The question is whether or not this simply mirrors the increasing failure of US policy. On the one hand, the reports of low troop morale roughly parallel the rise of fragging incidents and insubordination convictions. On the other hand, there is a massive increase in negative coverage of the South Vietnam political system during 1968, when in fact 1966 was

far more turbulent in terms of bombings, assassinations and corruption scandals, than anything that occurred later.

Hallin's thesis is that while journalists after Tet were much more inclined to report material that was critical of official policy, journalistic reporting throughout the war was characterised by a commitment to a tradition of objective journalism. Especially in comparison with other countries, Hallin argues, US journalism is relatively disengaged from active political involvement, and the journalist is assigned the largely passive role of transmitting information to the public. This is supported by the fact that only 8% of his sample of Vietnam stories contained explicitly favourable or unfavourable comment. This excludes news commentaries which, as we have seen, can be shaping forces, but the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of the news stories concentrated on supplying basic information of the "who what when where" variety. This is even more obvious when one considers that the most "damaging" news stories can in no way be attributed to investigative journalism: the Tet offensive erupted under journalists' noses, the Pentagon papers were leaked unsolicited, My Lai was not discovered until the story was broken by an independent reporter and the secret bombing of Cambodia only became an issue when it became the subject of a Congressional investigation.

This commitment to objectivity has one important outcome:

> Once it is accepted that the task of journalism is to provide the public not with opinion but with information, the crucial choice becomes the choice of sources. And the American journalist in the twentieth Century has solved this problem primarily by relying on official sources.[25]

Thus journalists centre around points where official information is to be released: the White House, the Pentagon, the MACV situation briefings. Naturally what is transmitted is primarily the government's view of the world. The situation was made more complex by the fact that a new story appeared beside the story of the war, that of domestic dissent. News from

the field and the Executive branch continued to reflect official sources, while policy opponents would more often appear to explain themselves and their actions rather than to talk about the war. The tradition of objective journalism requires that all this official information be passed on without comment, and Hallin's research shows that commentary was substantially less common on coverage of the US Executive than with other actors, the assumption being that official spokespeople could speak for themselves. By contrast one would expect an oppositional media to give more coverage to the opposition, and this is what happened - but with a large amount of unfavourable comment. As is common with much criticism of the United States way of life, critical coverage of Vietnam reporting was directed more at the administration and individuals than the political system itself. When core values, such as the belief that US Foreign Policy is prompted by consideration for democracy, were involved, coverage was usually legitimising. Indeed, even when things went horribly wrong, US journalists were often at great pains to point out that the US intentions had been good.

Hallin sees the Journalist world as divided into three regions. The first is the sphere of consensus - those social objects and beliefs regarded by journalists and most of their society as non-controversial. Here, journalists feel under no compulsion to present opposing views. Secondly, there is the sphere of legitimate controversy; the realm of public debate where the ethic of objective journalism comes into play. Lastly there are those political actors and viewpoints that are regarded as unworthy of being heard: in the early years of the war, the anti-war movement, the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese were all regarded as "unworthy".

Hallin argues that coverage in the early part of the war was favourable because Vietnam was not a particularly controversial issue within the

mainstream of US politics. Debate was usually confined to tactical considerations and reporting the official viewpoint did not involve taking sides on a controversial issue. But gradually:

> the sphere of consensus contracted while the sphere of legitimate controversy expanded. Not only did the media report the growing debate over the war, they were also affected by it. As the parameters of political debate changed, so did the behaviour of the media: stories that previously had been reported within a consensus framework came to be reported as controversies; subjects and points of view that had been beyond the pale in the early years came to be treated as legitimate news stories. Neither the institutional structure, nor the professional ideology of the media had changed substantially, but in a changed political environment these could have very different implications for the reporting of news.[26]

Although this does not mean that the Press is a passive or insignificant body, it does mean that it is an intervening, rather than an independent, link in the process by which political support and consensus is created or broken down.

Hallin's analysis is extensive and accurate as far as it goes, but it doesn't really take into account the highly visual nature of the war, and the changes that were occurring within and around representational contexts. Lawrence Lichty and Murray Fromson argue that this visual aspect was not as extensive as many people believed.[27] Their discussion centres around Morley Safer's famous report on the burning of the village of Camne. They indicate that most TV reports were not as critical as the Camne coverage and that, especially in the early part of the war, Safer's report was atypical, and not even consistent with the tone of many of his later reports. The conventional view is that the TV sets of middle-America were saturated every night with coverage of bloody fighting in Vietnam, but the two journalists indicate that this was not necessarily the case. They cite four influential and striking images from Vietnam: the burning monk, the shooting in the head of the VC suspect, the little girl that was accidentally napalmed and the marine setting fire to a hootch with a zippo

- all except the last image (from Camne) made their impact as still photos rather than as video footage. But this merely highlights the problems in trying to determine the effect of images. The key point is that while there were distortions imposed by the communications climate of Vietnam, it was the first un-censored war in the sense that the military extended almost unlimited access to news gathering agencies. Television thus had access to a great deal of information about the war and presented it in a fashion that was more immediate than, say, newsreels during WWII. The problem with typifying Vietnam as a television war, is that this statement most consistently crops up when television is being invoked as one of the reasons why the US lost the war. Thus the media is granted its objectivity - and this is turned around and used against them: resulting in the exclusion of the Press from Grenada, for example.

Fromson is not at all sure that coverage of another war now would be any different and he points to the situation in Iran, where the media is once again imposing the same distortions and exhibiting the same failure to try and understand a different culture. He says:

> So, did the television industry learn anything about covering a war, about showing a war on television? I don't think so. The war left a permanent effect on many of us individual journalists. There was a great frustration in our not being able to capture the essence of the war. That essence was never consistently translated to television film in human terms.[28]

Unfortunately this statement reveals the working of assumptions of objectivity in different ways. The problem with Vietnam was that it had no essence, in the sense of a single, transmissible meaning that would provide perception of events with some coherence, and the terms of the war were anything but human. If Hallin is right, then the commitment to journalistic objectivity served to expose the divisions within the governing and military elites, but the effect of this was not that people were exposed to more critical viewpoints and adopted these, as he seems to

indicate; rather, people began, perhaps, to dimly perceive the representational complexity of the world around them and to react against it. The much overused "credibility gap" was thus a representational gap. The comfortable assumptions that most people possessed, not only about their world, but about the way in which they perceived it, were being challenged. A natural response was to minimise the effects of this challenge and the easiest way to do this was to try and eliminate the one thing that the various disruptions seemed to centre around: Vietnam. Thus the US withdrawal from Vietnam may have been a triumph for the forces of political radicalism/liberalism, but it was also a victory for the forces of representational reaction. Public opposition to the war on a large scale stemmed not from the belief that it was morally or politically wrong - most people had no idea why the US was in Vietnam - but eventuated because people were sick of it, and frightened of the disruption and divisions it was creating within US society.

Believing in the veracity of its own truth-gathering processes, the media was never able to come to grips with a war that often flexed the limits of rationality as well as those of perception. Unable to perceive the link between language and control, the press was penetrated by the object that it was meant to describe, innuring the public to the language of kill ratios and the sight of burning children. The reverse was also true, it became a media war also in Vietnam itself: gung-ho commanders ready to stage whole operations for the benefit of the TV cameras and tours of recent battlefields were organised for the press and an assortment of dignitaries, military and civilians alike, all tarred by the same brush with dead language.

These obstacles to an effective coverage of Vietnam by the press reveal the impossibility of achieving a journalistic (or historical) detach-

ment. The observer is always enclosed by a particular cultural context whose values and assumptions inscribe the object the observer is meant to be describing. In part this stems from the real breakdown that Herr experienced in the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, the realisation that the observer cannot stand apart from that which is being observed.

> But of course we were intimate, I'll tell you how intimate: they were my guns and I let them do it. I never let them dig my holes or carry my gear, there were always grunts who offered, but I let them do that for me while I watched, maybe for them, maybe not. We covered each other, an exchange of services that worked all right until one night when I slid over to the wrong end of the story, propped up behind some sandbags at an airstrip in Can Tho with a .30 Calibre automatic in my hands, firing cover for a four man reaction team trying to get back in. One last war story. [D, p. 160]

Herr is operating from a context where levels of information have become not levels of knowledge but levels of disorientation. There has been a mutation in the spatial environment, proceeding largely from the intrusion into it of the mainly temporal considerations of communication. This, in the words of Jameson, who sees this as the quintessential postmodern experience, "has finally transcended the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organise its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world".[29] In response to this hyper-reality, this ecstasy of communication, where everything becomes so charged with meaning that meaning becomes overdetermined, Herr has had to find some other way of talking about Vietnam one that will not operate outside the traditional narratives but will incorporate them in new ways. "Objectivity", if it is in any way possible, must stem from a self-conscious acknowledgement of the biases inherent in these structures and the incorporation of their logic into a discourse in such a way as to make visible their workings and assumptions and undermine their authoritarian attempts at closure.

Herr's strategy is to effect a lack of discrimination between types of discourse, a championing of subjectivism in order to break down the tyrannical and ultimately negatory patterns of objective communication. In this he is foregrounding the problem of representation in the postmodern world, a world characterised by a decline in the authority of master narratives. Dispatches is thus an extraordinary blend of styles and tones, incorporating rock lyrics, obscenity and profanity, Black jive and military acronyms, as well as more conventional passages of narrative exposition and journalistic observation, which are themselves coloured and inscribed with this plethora of discourses. The breakdown of the distinction between pop and high culture is a much commented upon feature of postmodernism, but in Dispatches the result is not, as it sometimes is with other postmodern works (eg. Pynchon's Lot 49) a slippage over into an identification with the language of kitsch and schlock as another kind of transcendental signified. Rather, the abandonment of claims of objectivity and detachment opens a discursive field in which no particular type of language is given priority. Thus Dispatches is by Herr, but not in the usual sense: he has collected observations, stories, snippets, half-formed sensory impressions...; less an author than a "scriptor" to use Barthes' phrase. "Scripting" is an important metaphor, in that what he sees himself doing is making a "movie" of his time in Vietnam. This is a recognition of the way in which our "experience" of Vietnam has been vulnerable in the degree to which it has been largely a visual/filmic representation, conditioned by other war films. And while Dispatches mirrors the techniques of film in its rapid cutting, its short "shots" and so on, the text attempts to subvert the authority of a filmic text.

This "movie", for example, abandons the conventional narrative structures of cinema; there is no chronological coherence, and even a movement by association is sketchy. What this text seeks to do is reproduce the

temporal/spatial confusion of a communications glut: the first chapter is headed "Breathing In", the last, "Breathing Out", and between the two, the text "exists" in a vast suspensory pause, where the normal rules of coherence and rational logic do not apply. Even neo-mythic associations (one could well argue that names such as Khe Sanh and Hue have aquired a mythic significance, at least for Americans[30]) and reference to other texts (Graham Greene's The Quiet American and several books on Dien Ben Phu) fail to exert any authority over the text. Yet the novel does possess a strange kind of "readability", derived in part from the familiarity of many of the images and types of language, but also from the one thing that exerts any coherence over the text: Vietnam. But it is Vietnam as nothing more than a name, so charged with association as to be affectless, an empty, absent referent, a hole in language like the Lurp's narrative - "Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened" - with its "absent" message around which the scattered dispatches collect.

The form of Dispatches is reminiscent of the collage that Herr discovers on the wall of the young GI's house in Saigon:

> It included glimpses of burning monks, stacked Viet Cong dead, wounded Marines screaming and weeping, Cardinal Spellman waving from a chopper, Ronald Reagan, his face halved and separated by a stalk of cannabis; pictures of John Lennon peering through wire-rimmed glasses, Mick Jagger, Jimi Hendrix, Dylan, Eldridge Cleaver, Rap Brown; coffins draped with American flags whose stars were replaced with swastikas and dollar signs.... [D, p. 144]

As with Dispatches, the only thing that relates these fragments together is Vietnam, even if it is only to the extent that the collage was created in Vietnam. Yet there are lines of force running through and between the images, lines of sex, death, money, more and stranded cablings of all of these. It is a form in line with Jameson's belief that "the new political art - if indeed it is possible at all - will have to hold to the truth

of postmodernism, that is, to say, to its fundamental object -the world space of multinational capital..."[31]

Herr describes Vietnam as having a "poison history, fucked in the root no matter how far back you wanted to run your trace" (D, p. 41) and this poison is in large part the history of the evolution and expansion of multinational capitalism, phases of trade development, imperialism, ideological competition, exploitation and greed on the part of the West as well as the Vietnamese, a network of interactions that is too complex to be unravelled. So when Herr talks about having to piece together fear and hatred of the war with a very real love for it - "I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods" (D, p. 195) - or describes his "meta-chopper" as "saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot metal, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself hardly an intruder" (D, pp. 15-16), he is, in part, in this evocation of contraries and heterogeneity trying to come to grips with the vast de-centred network that is multinational capitalism as it inscribes and is inscribed by Vietnam.

This tentacular aspect of world capitalism and the cultural entrapment that characterised, specifically American perceptions in Vietnam, but in a wider context all perception, is manifested in Herr's discovery when he returned that, "There'd been nothing happening there that hadn't already existed here, coiled up and waiting, back in the World" (D, p. 200). It is a familiarity that breeds disorientation. In the Pacific TIME was right there on the side of the man in the aid station to bring us the facts: in Vietnam the communications somehow failed, the man died before he could tell us what happened, and we are left holding a narrative with no centre, a narrative that is "about" the failure of narra-

tive. There is also the realisation that is the dynamic of Dispatches - that what governs these historical processes, what creates them, is the way in which we talk about them. There is no History - in the sense of a stable, essential and wholly objective entity - only different (differential) structures of fictional narrative. Vietnam has a postmodern context, which is as much to say that people like Herr talk about it in a postmodern way, out of a recognition that the older narratives will not fit this new season. What emerges is that which Herr sums up succinctly in one line: "Not much chance anymore for History to go on unselfconsciously" (D, p. 42).

This realisation that History is just another name for narrative, a discourse of organisation that finally places us in no more privileged position to reality than black jive or a rock lyric - "Those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it too, that's a little history joke" (D, p. 203) - does not sit comfortably with some readers. Jameson, for example, can say of the historical novel (in which class I would place Dispatches, if only to undermine the coherence of that category) that:

> If there is any realism left here, therefore, it is a "realism" which is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement and slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.[32]

Hal Foster is even more upset and delivers a stinging rebuke, aimed implicitly at works such as Dispatches:

> This "return to history" is ahistorical for three reasons: the context of history is disregarded, its continuum is disavowed and conflictual forms of art and modes of production are falsely resolved in pastiche. Neither the specificity of the past nor the necessity of the present is heeded. Such a disregard makes the return to history also seem to be a liberation from history. And today many artists do feel that, free of history, they are able to use it as they wish. Yet, almost self-evidently, an art form is specific, its meaning is part and parcel of its period and cannot be transposed innocently. To see other periods as mirrors of our own is to turn history into narcissism; to see

> other styles as open to our own is to turn history into a dream. But such is the dream of the pluralist: he seems to sleepwalk in the museum.[33]

One could write a lengthy critique on the metaphysical loadings that characterise this passage, but the initial criticism is valid: much of this (a)historical art can be seen as serving the ends of late capitalism by replicating its logic of fragmentation. Yet this has always been a problematic, if not unavoidable feature of historical analysis; older teleological models of representation fell just as easily into the service of the bourgeoisie, used to describe the linear logic of its dominance, just as it was used by communism to reflect the inevitability of its victory, thereby justifying its existence. It would seem that a critical strategy that advocates de-stabilisation and disruption has more radical implications than a return to the sanctity of context, the specificity of style and text, the rage for periodisation that Foster and Jameson, influenced heavily by Marxist definitions of "political action" and "social conscience", seem to advocate.

The second part of Jameson's manifesto for political art says that such a form must achieve "a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable mode of representing..."[34] This new mode of representation necessarily involves new modes of perception, one commensurate with the hyperreal in which we live. In Dispatches a model of something approaching this radical self-referentiality is provided by the figure of the photographer, Tim Page.

> His talk was endlessly referential, he mixed in images from the war, history, rock, Eastern religion, his travels, literature (he was very widely read and proud of it) but you came to see that he was really only talking about one thing, Page. [D, p. 191]

Dispatches does finally effect a narrative closure - one must finally breathe out again - but the next breath is now problematic, for the "meaning" of the text "closes" not on a resolution, like Goodbye Darkness,

but on its opposite: "And no moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there" (D, p. 207).

REVELATIONS - REVALUATIONS

The current explosion of textual material on Vietnam has one of its sources in the Vets' desire, in common with the survivors of all wars, to find some way of talking about what had happened to them "over there". Talking about an experience that was, and for many still is, an extremely traumatic one represents a means of coming to grips with that experience, of reducing the repercussions of the traumatic events by creating for them a context to replace the one that has been destroyed. Telling others what it was like creates a narrative unity, and by virtue of this generates meaning to replace that which has been lost: narrative engenders a meaning for singularly brutal events and, by extension, the meaning of the whole world, whole no longer.

But the status of Vietnam as creator/destroyer/distorter of languages, to the extent that it turned the linguistic and physical environment of the word Vietnam, and of the Word as a stable basis for meaning, into Herr's "communications pudding", shattered the possibility of a common language of shared experience. Frederick Downs Jnr., an assistant Director of the Veterans Administration in New Mexico, commented in 1979:

> We Vietnam Veterans cannot get ourselves organised as a group. Our ideas on Vietnam and on America's reaction to us have never come from one strong voice. If there is one thing Vietnam veterans have in common, it is our inability to band together in one large single group. We have been so busy coping with our individual problems as Vietnam Veterans that we have stayed away from each other. That in itself is unusual. Anyone who has shared an experience with someone else should not have any trouble joining with that person. But it is almost as if we have spent so much of ourselves

> trying to regain our dignity, our lives and our personhood that we do not want to join any group for fear we will lose what we have worked so hard to attain.[1]

Those who have gone to war are already powerfully alienated from those on the Home Front by virtue of the gap between their experiences; when this gap is widened further by an inability to communicate within the group, all that remains to Vets are private idiolects: fragmented, idiosyncratic and representationally unstable.

This was compounded by an attempt, on the surface at least, to erase the memory tape. Most people in the US thought they knew all there was to know about Vietnam because it had been so extensively televised - at any rate they did not want to know more. Vietnam was dismissed as a costly and bloody failure, spoken as if somehow the country itself was responsible and not the CIA, the Viet Cong, the Marine Corps or General Westmoreland. For many, the Vietnam experience was not what had happened in a small country 10,000 miles away, but what had happened within the US. The dissent and debate about involvement in Indochina showed that the US was not as homogeneous, especially in support of its government, as most Americans had thought. Events also posed severe questions about fundamental US beliefs, especially in terms of the perceived gap between the nation's actions, stated intentions and underlying moral justifications. After Kent State and the Chicago Convention, questions about how the government dealt with people overseas were matched by questions as to how it presided over the wishes of its own citizens. With the protest against the war, the Civil Rights movement, the Women's movement, the ghetto uprisings, and later Watergate and the Oil Shocks, the period from the large-scale commitment of US forces in 1965 to the fall of Saigon in 1975 was a traumatic one for the US, perhaps more so than any period except that surrounding the Civil War. Traumatic in that it was not only a period of great social change but, like the Civil War, a period in which many of the US fundamental perceptions of

itself were called into question. And the first response to trauma is, of course, denial.

But there were over a million men who served in Vietnam, and millions more who were affected in various ways, more deeply than they realised at the time. As individuals and as a culture they were working through the second response to trauma, a compulsion to repeat the traumatic experience. There was, also, always money to be made. So the books came out slowly, feeding the lure of the forbidden, but also building up a discursive pattern, a repertoire of images, momentum: Going After Cacciato, A Rumour of War, Dog Soldiers, Dispatches, The 13th Valley, Chickenhawk, - until it appeared there was collective agreement that a decent interval had passed. The humiliating events of the Seventies had been compensated for, through actions such as the raids against Libya and the invasion of Grenada, and the past could be resurrected from the sanctity of a secure present/presence.

The current discourse on US involvement in Vietnam, which is only sometimes extended to incorporate US involvement with Indochina as a whole, involves not only the events of that period but also the way in which the US interprets events and forms their relationship with the recognition and transmission of some of its most fundamental values. As Dispatches demonstrates, this is largely a question of imposing a historical narrative: establishing a framework for events that imposes meaning upon the nation's past and uses that past as justification for the present and a pattern for the future.

It is very hard to separate perception of the disparate elements of the Vietnam experience - the brutality, the racism, the economic exploitation, the loss of meaning, informational entropy - from the fact that the US lost the war, that it was all for nothing. It was as if the US had not been

defeated but rather repulsed, and there are all the emotions of the scorned lover: bitterness, rage, a desire for retribution, enormous sadness - especially if the lover knows, deep down, that their intentions have been less than honourable and selfless. Even more devastating was the loss of the moral high ground, not only from the point of view of the rest of the world, but also with its own citizens. The "right" of the US to make decisions on behalf of others had been called into question, also the whole basis upon which it assumed that right - the picture of the US as a democratic utopia to which other countries could aspire. The race riots, protest rallies, assassinations, the Chicago Convention all showed that the US was not a New World paradise; that it was a society torn by strife, with a State that practised violence not only against its poverty-stricken and oppressed, but against the products of its upper and middle classes. Never again could the US lay claim to the clean backyard it presumed to set up in others.

This is the trauma of Vietnam: that it was a lost cause, a hell on earth for those who were sent there, unredeemed by any final victory or sense of a more total purpose back in the world. This makes it hard to separate the Vets' feelings of betrayal, and the US public's hostility towards the Vets, from an overall communal sense of loss. In this there are striking parallels between the US' experience of Vietnam and the European experience of World War I. For Europeans World War I also was traumatic; there was the feeling that it had been revelatory but in such a way as to shatter some cherished cultural illusions. It is interesting to note in this context that what was World War I for much of the world was, and is, the Great War for Europeans. In point of statistical fact, it ranged far less widely, involved fewer countries, and killed less people, especially civilians, than did the Second World War. As far as the US was concerned, it had been involved for a shorter time and had suffered fewer

casualties than the European countries. The war had also not touched the majority of US citizens in the same way that it had Europeans. Yet US involvement was not insubstantial and the fighting in 1917 and 1918 was some of the bloodiest of the war; US soldiers suffered and died in the same conditions that provoked Owen and Sassoon to verse - yet culturally World War I remained World War I. Part of the reason may lie in the fact that the US had already had its "Great War" back in the 1860's - it also featured trench warfare, large scale use of artillery and the introduction of machine guns and aerial observation.[2]

Another reason is that the effects of a war are as much ideological as physical. For Europeans the First World War did not shake the foundations of their society as much as the foundations of their belief. So much nineteenth century faith, of various kinds, was invested in order, systems, logic - power could be balanced, the self-interest of states could be played off against one another almost indefinitely to provide a definition of the common good, man was rational (even if woman was not); nurtured in an institutional ferment European society was the apotheosis of civilization. The war dealt this system of beliefs a serious blow, stripping away the layers of supposed advance until it seemed that the progress of civilization was defined only by the ability of humans to kill each other in ever increasing numbers. The US did not suffer this disillusionment, or at least not as deeply. Its isolated mentality meant that it did not have an emotional investment in the European State System, even if it indirectly required its existence for the success of its economic ventures.

Given that the aftermath of a war is determined as much by the cultural expectations and self-image which proceed it as by the actual events of the conflict, it is possible that history will reflect upon Vietnam as the US' Great War. Like Europe before World War I, the US before Vietnam

evidences a faith in the superiority of its culture and its worldview, including the right to promote its version of economic and political reality around the world. Certainly the effects of Vietnam in combination with the other events of the decade from '64 to '74 have been of far greater significance for the US and of greater duration than those from World War I. One does not, for example, discover references to US foreign policy in the twenties as suffering from the "Great War Syndrome".

This feeling is implicit in Caputo's A Rumour of War[3] where many of the chapters are prefaced with quotes from Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon.[4] There are certainly parallels between the US and European experiences in terms of a loss of the illusion of cultural innocence, a substantial measure of social dislocation, the destruction of ideals and the "discovery" of a dark, irrational, savage side of human nature. Also similar is the way in which the US perceives Vietnam and its aftermath in terms of a profound spiritual crisis that affects not just individuals, but the national character as a whole. Vietnam is seen not merely as the most significant event of a generation, as is the case with most wars, but as a watershed in the nation's history. Descriptions of Vietnam and its effects habitually employ biblical terminology: the experience has been revelatory, even apocalyptic, involving problematic spiritual, moral and ethical choices and rituals of judgement, sin, guilt, blame and atonement.

What is worrying about all this is that it looks very much like an attempt to "place" Vietnam within a series of traditional cultural contexts. This mood is captured in a comprehensive discussion in a 1981 issue of The Center Magazine entitled "Vietnam: Will There be a Collective Healing?"[5] A diversity of viewpoints is represented, but by and large the various perspectives are marked by a singular inability of their proponents to see themselves as actors in a process of helping to create a narrative framework for the Vietnam experience. There is the assumption, largely

unchallenged, that whether it is possible or not, "collective healing" is still a relevant theme for discussion, when it is far from certain that the US has truly been "injured" in anything more than a superficial manner. Much of the discussion is pitched at the level of conventional religious, moral or therapeutic doctrine to the degree that the Vets become insignificant and their experiences almost irrelevant.

> The impact of Vietnam is being experienced through a continuing ritual, a process very much like that of confession, absolution and restoration. The Vietnam Veteran centres are the places where the ritual is being worked out. The counsellors in these Vet centres function as confessors, like secular priests. The vet centres themselves are like neighbourhood religious communities, all of them involving persons living and working together in the ritual process.[6]

There is a grain of truth in this but it is hard to picture the overworked, often underfunded Vet centres, (many of them set up as self-help refuges, while others struggle for political acceptance) as modern-day equivalents of the mediaeval church.

What is at work here is an attempt to collectivise and generalise, to publicise what has been personal and private so that it can be more readily understood. Knowledge is power; in this case one suspects that it is power over the demons that beset Americans, the dark side of American endeavour that forms the great American Nightmare: fear of failure, fear of betrayal. Above all, fear of impoverishment both financial and spiritual. All the talk of the religious anguish of the Vets perhaps conceals a fear on the part of the commentators that the US has lost the ability to form a unified, collective, national spiritual response.

> Now, sadly, "It don't mean nothin' has become for many veterans a deeply imbedded way of perceiving all life. It informs their evaluation of their own spiritual and moral capacity, and it describes their experience with religion, at least with a distinctively American brand of religion.[7]

"It don' mean nothin'" was one of a number of standard responses used by soldiers in Vietnam. It could be said in bitterness, a grunt raging to the

point of apathy against the meaninglessness of his suffering, of all suffering. But in Vietnam it was also a form of reassurance; reaffirming, even if it was as a last ditch attempt, the individual's ability to control his mind, if not his body; if not his everyday existence then at least the way in which he interpreted it. It reflected less an experience with religion than a brutal confrontation with the subjective and arbitrary nature of all meaning. Like the revulsion/excitement of combat, and intimately connected with it, this unconstrained freedom of the individual to order their world raised possibilities for both ecstasy and despair.

The problem with saying that the Vets are suffering from a spiritual malaise is that the same could be said of almost everyone in the US to some extent - indeed Carter did say it in the late 1970's. In the postwar cultural climate there is hardly anyone who has not come up against the profound relativism of all life; society and community, of course, are designed to either frustrate or compensate for these realisations, at the very least to keep them at bay. What separates the Vets off from the rest of the culture is thus the question of degree, and the fact that there was little community support for them when they came back. They were exposed suddenly and completely to an environment made completely relativistic by those things usually relied upon to give the World and our lives meaning: information and language. They came face to missing face with the arbitrary nature of morality, ethics, and spirituality and the absoluteness of death. The effect of talking about a "spiritual malaise" is thus to perpetuate the confusion, to locate the cause of the Vets' disaffection in a nebulous conjectural realm, almost completely severed from the social and political realm and issues of power and powerlessness.

The Vet's experience is one of alienation and betrayal from the rest of US culture, yet there is also the realisation that even if there were not

this hostility, they stand out from other men because of their strange and terrible knowledge.

> We learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal. Everyone loses that illusion eventually, but in civilian life it is lost in installments over the years. We lost it all at once and, in the span of a few months, passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age. The knowledge of death, of the implacable limits placed on a man's existence, severed us from our youth as irrevocably as a surgeon's scissors had once severed us from the womb. [RW, p. xv]

This alienation is the source of a number of unresolved tensions within the Vet movement, not the least of which is a nostalgia for Vietnam and for the friendships that were made there. In Fields of Fire, Hodges, reassigned to Okinawa after being wounded, gives voice to an emotion that occurs repeatedly in the writings of Vets:

> He had missed the people in the bush more than he had ever missed any group of people in his life. There was a purity in those relationships that could not be matched anywhere else. A person's past was irrelevant, unless it affected his performance. A person's future was without exception bright: the Great Reward for doing battle awaited all of them in the World. There was a common goal and a mutual enemy. And the stakes were high enough to make each minor victory sweet, each loss a cause for grief.[8]

Yet most Vets cannot lose sight of the paradoxes that these feelings invoke: choices are more clear-cut and life more meaningful only in the context of a situation of almost staggering complexity; brotherhood and humanity become possible as the result of a most savage and barbarous disregard for human life; men feel affirmed in the midst of meaningless destruction. Caputo writes, "I could protest as loudly as the most convinced activist, but I could not deny the grip the war had on me, nor the fact that it had been an experience as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it was sad, as tender as it was cruel" (RW, p. xvi). Many treasure that special knowledge at the same time as they are alienated by it and there is confusion over the form of recognition which they are to be

accorded, how they are to be re-integrated with society. But their experience is not collective, nor does it pretend to be universal.

The literature of Vietnam is different from the literature of other wars in that it deals with not just the experience of combat, the savage inhumanity of war, or a loss of innocence and a fall into experience. Vet literature places a strong emphasis upon the individual's relationship to his culture and Vietnam is seen to involve the fall into experience of a terrifyingly innocent US political and social culture. The literature is heavily autobiographical, even confessional; there is ritual here but it is not a ritual of redemption. For the confession is not directed towards God but towards the US people - the confession that as soldiers they sinned against US culture, but that in doing so they were perhaps more sinned against. In this ritual there is no clergy that mediates between man and God in the article of confession. The mediator has become the media, but as of old there are forms to be observed and certain patterns develop in the responses despite the deeply personal, often idiosyncratic nature of the confession.

The texts written by Vets are saturated with religious references and echoes, and seem to invoke the Vietnam experience as a profound spiritual event. A Rumour of War is prefaced with a quote from the Gospel of Matthew that details images of the Last Days. Dog Soldiers also opens with talk of the Last Days and there is the feeling of events winding up towards Apocalypse. But both texts and others like them, tend to use the religious references in order to suggest the problematic nature of the notion of spiritual crisis as it relates to Vietnam. There is an implicit recognition that the apocalypticism that the experience seems to involve, has become an integral part of postwar culture. After 40 years of being told that we are constantly living on the brink of global extermination, apocalypticism has become a fact of life, a description of the violence

that is characteristic of culture's process of transformation and mutation. Dog Soldiers is prefaced with a quote from Conrad's Heart of Darkness that suggests the decline in the force of "apocalyptic" passions:

> I've seen the devil of violence and the devil of greed and the devil of hot desire; but by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils that swayed and drove men - men, I tell you. But as I stood on that hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land, I would become aquainted with a flabby, pretending weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly.[9]

Thus the "heroes" of the book are drug smugglers, the lead character's name is "Converse" and the final section of the book is played out amidst the searing heat and baked, shimmering flatness of the New Mexico desert; an image that suggests the entropic flatness of the emotional relationships in the novel. It also recalls Eliot's "not with a bang, but a whimper" speculation of the end of human affairs.

In the same vein, Tim O'Brien's Going After Cacciato[10] evokes a host of mythic and religious associations that range from Grail quests and trips into the underworld to the Fisher King and the persecution of Christ, only to subvert these and throw their powers of coherence into disarray through a narrative that is unstable and uncertain. Del Vecchio's The 13th Valley[11] while it may echo both the biblical and Tennysonian Valleys of Death as well as drawing upon conventional unlucky associations, refers rather to the indistinguishable sameness, to Western eyes of the Vietnamese landscape; the title is drawn from a phrase used by an intelligence officer in a briefing in order to make the topography more comprehensible. Webb's Fields of Fire meanwhile, seems to reinforce a traditional perception of the battleground as a place of honour where men are baptised, where they obtain self-knowledge and possession: but the title is also a strategic term - a pragmatic exploitation of the terrain to give you the most effective means of destroying human beings. And the continuous religious references in Caputo's text are constantly subverted, disconnected and

re-attached to warlike associations: "Evening vespers began about seven o'clock, when the howitzers and mortars started firing their routine harassment missions" (RW, p. 222). What these Vets are describing is not merely a spiritual crisis but a crisis of spirituality.

This calling into question of the very concept of spirituality stems partly from Vets' resentment and feelings of betrayal at the hands of secular religion: far more real to most Americans than the religions of God such as Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism, are the religions that surround the Deific America - so special in the eyes of God that the country itself has assumed the mantle of Divine Authority. It is the US that the Vets feel has let them down. Harry Ashmore, again in a Center Magazine article, puts it thus:

> The most significant impact of Vietnam, then, was not upon those combat soldiers who endured it, but upon the whole college generation that avoided military service - and upon the establishmentarian elders who came to support their children in defiance of their own ingrained values.... The debacle in Vietnam was not merely a failure of arms, but a failure of patriotism - and patriotism, by definition, is a matter of faith.[12]

Although Ashmore downgrades the soldiers' experience based upon his belief that Vietnam was a war like any other, he does pinpoint quite clearly the cultural changes which led to much Vet disaffection. Many Vets point to an elitist withdrawal of responsibility which is reflected in the widespread failure of a large portion of the civilian culture to uphold its share of military service, both physically in the form of fighting, and morally in terms of supporting the fighting men when they were over there and when they came home.

The depth of the disillusionment can be understood in terms of the strength of the illusions that reigned before the war. The investment of the US political system with an ultimate value to the point where it becomes a religion in its own right, is reflected in everything from the

religious phraseology that characterises its Foundation documents to a continual endorsement of its democratic ideals, even by those who are on the losing end of the system. At the beginning of the Vietnam War it was possible to look back to the US military and economic triumph in World War II and the relative stability of the fifties that seemed to be its reward and invoke a national mythology: the US had been called by God to a special destiny that lay in South East Asia. Caputo in particular is very bitter about this, with the ferocity that only a disillusioned former believer can possess. He is also in no doubt as to where the blame lies. He says that he and his colleagues were "seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to "ask what you can do for your country" and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us" (RW, p. xiv). Later he describes JFK as a "political witch doctor" (RW, p. 315) and says that "If he was the King of Camelot, then we were his knights and Vietnam our crusade" (RW, p. 66).

W. P. Mahedy, in his article exploring the idea of the religious malaise, extends the crusade metaphor:

> Most veterans embraced the theology of our foreign policy. They went to Vietnam with great fervour to stop the onslaught of Godless Communism. Most were products of homes which were at least culturally Christian. Many former altar boys were among them. War - glorious war, that cultic act of civil religion - was unquestionable part of the mythology which gripped them as they went off to the great crusade in Southeast Asia.[13]

The reasons for the disaffection can be gauged when one compares the above with the reality. Caputo again:

> And then there was that inspiring order issued by General Greene: kill VC. In the patriotic fervour of the Kennedy years we had asked, "What can we do for our country?" and our country answered, "Kill VC" (RW, p. 218).

While the metaphor of the crusade is undoubtedly one embraced by a large part of the nation, one needs to be wary about ascribing it as a motive for all soldiers. Certainly it was part of the experience of most soldiers and may have formed the framework of much of their initial understanding of

Vietnam. But the crusade against "godless communism" is a curiously middle class ideal, believed by many soldiers only at the level of rhetoric and becoming more problematic the more one experienced of the war.

Many of those who fought in the early part of the war had joined the military rather than specifically signing up for Vietnam, even though this seemed the most likely focus of US action. The reasons they joined up were often various and had little to do with godless communism; Caputo himself admits that he joined mainly out of a sense of boredom with the 50's suburban lifestyle and out of a need to prove something about his manhood. Others - the majority - who lacked the middle class background of Caputo joined up because it got them out of either the ghetto or of one of the many depressed rural areas of the US: the military offered money, a career, status in the community, a sense of both camaraderie and self-worth. And there were many who joined up then, and later when war became an actuality, who wanted to fight, to experience the glorious combat that had formed the substance of Hollywood films and much of the literature of the culture.

What the Vets cannot forgive the US is that the US cannot forgive them. Many see themselves as being condemned for doing their job in the service of a military that is a profession like any other, a profession that many Vets still regard as noble. Yet not quite like any other. For the job that soldiers are paid to do is to kill on behalf of a society and a culture irrespective of the reasons for doing so; whether they be offensive or defensive, moral or immoral, the soldier is paid to kill and run the risk of being killed so that others won't have to. As Caputo points out, they had done what their country had asked them to do, and their country had turned around and blamed them for doing it.[14] Many Vets came to see, while still in Vietnam, that as opposition to the war grew, so did opposition to them as people. They were waging terrible war for people who no longer wanted it.

The public's perception of the war was that it was not only brutal, but unnecessarily and immorally so. Much of this was due to the televising of the fighting, but Vets themselves acknowledge the savagery of the war. Caputo discusses the two most common explanations for US brutality: 1) US troops were racist; they found it easy to kill Asians because they regarded them as non-human; although this recalls the near pathological hatred of the Indian and their near genocide, this would seem to be far from a uniquely US vice, but perhaps one that afflicts all imperial, colonial powers; 2) A corruption of the Frontier thesis, the idea that Americans are inherently violent and pre-disposed towards confrontation and brutality. Caputo points out that there is a grain of truth in each hypothesis but that they ignore the atrocities inflicted upon the Vietnamese by the French and by their own people in the form of the ARVN, VC and NVA (the mass executions in Hue, for example).

> The evil was inherent not in the men - except in the sense that a devil dwells in us all - but in the circumstances under which they had to live and fight. The conflict in Vietnam combined the two most bitter forms of warfare, civil war and revolution, to which was added the ferocity of jungle war. Twenty years of terrorism and fratricide had obliterated most reference points from the moral map long before we arrived. [RW, p. xviii]

Some observers have explained the US' hostile reception of its returning soldiers by pointing out that people had not only become opposed to the Vietnam war, but increasingly to the idea of war in general; Vets were thus unpopular for what they had done but also for what they represented. While this may have been the point of view of some Americans the support that Reagan has received for the administration's military adventures indicates that opposition to the idea of war was not widespread or very deep-seated. The opposition was rather to a war that caused so much internal disruption in the US and in the minds of its people. When Americans looked at the Vietnam soldiers and what they had done, they saw a whole side of

themselves they had no wish to confront, and the soldiers became a scapegoat for the promise of the sixties that had turned sour.

Mahedy argues that although the anti-war movement challenged the idea of the Holy Crusade, it too was rooted in special ideas about national destiny - the American nation had sinned against its special covenant by becoming involved in Vietnam. This idea of the Covenant was just a powerful as that of the crusade because it is an idea that goes back to the first Puritan settlements. Despite being perceived as such, the anti-war movement was not politically radical as far as the majority of its participants were concerned, nor was it particularly anti-American. They were opposed to the people in LBJ's government and to certain policies, but it was also somehow more American to oppose the war. The invocation of patriotism to oppose a government that seemed to disregard its moral responsibilities helps, in part to explain the strength of the movement and the intensity of the backlash against the Vets as agents of that moral bankruptcy.

It also helps to explain the strength and success of the Conservative resurgence in the eighties which likewise employed a description of the culture that had a religious basis. God had deserted the US because it had violated other articles of its covenant in favour of liberalism, sexual permissiveness, flabby moral tolerance and so on, thus taking the liberal argument and standing its on its head; even to the point of advocating the original liberal evil, involvement in the affairs of other countries. This tendency to describe the cultural climate of the US in either explicitly religious terms or more general spiritual ones is thus far from new and not limited to any one ideological affiliation. To describe the experience of Vets in this way, to characterise their criticism of the US culture in terms of a spiritual crisis, is thus to co-opt their experience within a traditional perception of the US relationship to history.

The other major reason for the Vets' disillusionment is the shock to their more conventional religious sensibilities when they discovered that war is not merely inhuman, but anti-human; part of a more general postwar erosion of the humanistic worldview. Humanism allows for a range of thought from the Renaissance to high modernism, that credits man with some autonomy from the world and control over it. Even modernism, which represents the crisis of humanism, asserts that one may be divorced from direct contact with the world but still be able to order the representations of it. This Independence of the human spirit is seen to be almost meaningless in Vietnam where war is a matter of mobility, firepower, accuracy, the attainment of coded objectives and numerically identified identical hills. At first it seems that this changed nature of modern warfare is perceived by Lieutenant Sidney Martin in Going After Cacciato:

> He knew something was wrong with this war. The absence of a common purpose....But the lieutenant knew that in war purpose is never paramount, neither purpose nor cause, and that battles are always fought among human beings, not purposes. He could not imagine dying for a purpose. Death was its own purpose, no qualification or restraint and war was the way. He did not celebrate war. He did not believe in glory. But he recognised the enduring appeal of battle: the chance to confront death many times, as often as there were battles. Secretly the lieutenant believed that war had been invented for just that reason - so that through repetition men might try to do better, so that lessons might be savoured and applied the next time, so that men might not be robbed of their own deaths. In this sense alone Sidney Martin believed in war as a means to ends. A means of confronting ending itself, many repeated endings. He was neither stupid nor full of bravado. He was quiet. He had blue eyes and fine blond hair and strong teeth. He was a professional soldier, but unlike other professionals he believed that the overriding mission was the inner mission, the mission of every man to learn the important things about himself.[15]

The passage sheds light on the enduring appeal of war, which Caputo describes as "the ordinary man's most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary" (RW, p. 6). Yet Sidney Martin is only one of a number of voices and like most things in Going After Cacciato needs to be regarded with extreme caution. His belief evokes memories of Hemingway in another time

and expresses well the humanism that underlays modernism: talk of the inner mission, and war as an experience of self-discovery; the central humanist dictum that "man is the measure of all things" is expressed in Martin's belief that war is a mighty test laid on for Man's benefit. That lieutenant Sidney Martin's point of view may be outmoded is perhaps indicated by his undignified death when he is "fragged" by his own men, who obviously do not share his belief in war as a testing ground for the human spirit.[16]

Of a completely different character is the following piece from Dog Soldiers, where Hicks describes what he learned in Vietnam:

> One insight was that the ordinary physical world through which one shuffled heedless and half-assed toward non-entity was capable of composing itself, at any time and without notice, into a massive instrument of agonising death. Existence was a trap; the testy patience of things as they are might be exhausted at any moment.
>
> Another was that in the single moment when the breathing world had hurled itself screeching and murderous at his throat, he had recognised the absolute correctness of its move. In those seconds it seemed absurd that he had ever been allowed to go his foolish way, pursuing notions and small joys. He was ashamed of the casual arrogance with which he had presumed to scurry about creation. From the bottom of his heart he concurred in the moral necessity of his annihilation.[17]

The view of human nature that is being presented here is one in which humanity has lost control completely and is now at the mercy of an environment that is actively hostile. There is the sense that the destruction is personal, yet it seems to have no connection to anything else, no narrative; with a terrifying impersonality it just happens.

War is still an act of discovery, but the nature of the discovery is vastly different. "In a manner of speaking, he had discovered himself. Himself was a soft, shell-less quivering thing encased in a hundred and sixty pounds of pink sweating meat. It was real enough. It tried to burrow into the earth. It wept."[18] The use of the neutral "it" is

significant here and the passage as a whole bears a striking resemblance to Caputo's description of his experiences.

> The horror lay in the recognition that the body, which is supposed to be the earthly home of an immortal soul, which people spend so much time feeding, conditioning, and beautifying, is in fact only a fragile case stuffed full of disgusting matter.... The sight of mutilation did more than cause me physical revulsion; it burst the religious myths of my Catholic childhood. I could not look at those men and still believe their souls had "passed on" to another existence, or that they had had souls in the first place. I could not believe those bloody messes would be capable of a resurrection on the Last Day. They did, in fact, seem "more" dead. Massacred or annihilated might better describe what had happened to them. Whatever, they were gone for good, body, mind and spirit. [RW, p. 121]

The dis-covery here is often a quite literal uncovering of the body's workings. It is less a self-discovery than the dawning of the awful truth that the self is but one more fiction destroyed by the onset of violent death. As these conventional myths were undermined by wartime experience, for many soldiers the "meaning" of their lives in Vietnam, and sometimes after, lay almost solely in having survived. It lay in marking the days off on one's calendar, with all physical and mental progress relative to the day that one could catch the Freedom Bird home and away from Vietnam. Thus the quote from the Book of Matthew that prefaces A Rumour of War ends: "But he that shall endure unto the end, he shall be saved." This also illuminates the title of Dog Soldiers. Hicks recalls an old proverb to the effect that the live dog is revered more than the dead lion. Nothing matters if you don't survive.

Conventional religious myths, like the myths that surround the religion of America, seek to bind men together by defining each man as a self-sufficient whole, his self/soul is his own on loan from God. But this did not match up to the soldier's experience in Vietnam.

> I had begun to see almost everyone as they would look in death, including myself. Shaving in the mirror in the morning, I could see myself dead, and there were moments when I not only saw my own corpse, but other people looking at it.

> I saw life going on without me. The sensation of not being anymore came over me at night, just before falling asleep. Sometimes it made me laugh inside; I could not take myself seriously when I could already see my own death; nor, seeing their deaths as well, could I take others seriously. We were all the victims of a great practical joke played on us by God or nature. Maybe that was why corpses always grinned. They saw the joke at the last moment. [RW, p. 219]

Much that is described here runs counter to traditional religious mythology - the multi-layered nature of experience, superposition, the fear of not being, death as a natural yardstick, death as a moment that is both revelatory, inscrutable and final.... Faced with this, soldiers had to create their own mythology, their own way of describing the world and their experience. These descriptions are strongly personal in response to the breakdown in myths of collectivity and contain much that is both new and very old. Soldiers throughout the ages have, to an extent, made the same discoveries and come up with the need to create their own mythological version of reality. But the cultural context in which this act of re-covery takes place does not remain static. Hemingway, for example, also creates his own mythology, but this is established through a number of cultural references to masculinity, honour, self-discovery and so on. This possibility of inflating one's personal rationale into a general cultural belief has become extremely problematic in the context of Vietnam. The failure of the older myths represents a failure of narrative, because it is by putting things within a narrative framework that we create meaning. This is usually a meaning based on accumulation; events follow each other in a series, thus the meaning of each individual event is based upon a continuity with its predecessors; based also on the "meaning" of the narrative as a whole and on the larger continuity of its relationship to other narratives. The relativism that this creates is obvious but up until the postwar period this was more or less held in check by cultural codes and by a traditional regard for the sanctity of context.

It is precisely this loss of context and disruption of a smooth continuity of events that has characterised both the Vets' experience in Vietnam, and the experience of the culture as a whole. The collapse of religious myths was coextensive with an undermining of the basis for collective action; the sense of community upon which mainstream organised religion depends. This failure of collectivism is also a failure of the individuality which it posits as its antithesis but which it must cultivate within itself in order to overcome. During the postwar period, and increasingly during the sixties, there is a rise in religious phenomena based around a surrender of individuality. On the one had there is an increase in cult worship with their fascist denial of the individual self in favour of the group, which in turn has its manifestation and fulfilment in the body of its leader. On the other hand the sixties seem to preside over a re-emphasis on the individual and the possibility of individual action; but self-discovery and self-actualisation increasingly become self-abandonment and a submergence of individualism in pantheistic philosophies: meditation, drugs, and so on. This has links with an American Transcendentalist tradition, but its appeal is also the lure of fascism. So getting in touch with oneself and liberating oneself from the shackles of role enforcement proceeds during the sixties in the form of large spectacles of collectivism: Be-Ins, Love-Ins, Sit-Ins, protest marches, and the rise of the massive outdoor rock rally.

Herr's statement that: "There was nothing happening over there that hadn't already existed here, coiled up and waiting, back in the World" [19] shows that the same processes that eroded the representational stability of communications in Vietnam were at work in mainstream US culture, turning each person, if not into an island, then into a very tiny nodal point amidst a technological lattice of an awesome and frightening complexity. What had happened to the Vet may not have made sense, may have been almost

unbearable in the awful intensity of its experience, but at least in Vietnam he was amongst men with whom he could share the experience, and if not exorcise it then at least be among those who understood its special terrors. The vets called the US "the World" out of recognition that it was a different place that might as well be no place. The World was at least nominally a province of sanity, normality, a life regulated by rules and their enforcement. But the soldiers lived for at least thirteen months and often longer, in a heart of darkness where they were required to perform deeds that were sometimes darker than any that either Kurtz or Conrad had contemplated. In Going After Cacciato, the soldiers communicate with the US via the Military Air Radio System, and its acronymic substitute might just as well be where they are calling for all that the day to day life of middle America has any relevance to their experience.

It is inevitable that the US will create new myths and narratives to replace the old ones about Vietnam; a traumatic suspension of meaning and context is never permanent. But before the US can "confront" its history it needs to confront its culture; to confront the ways in which it makes its history and the mechanisms it uses to appropriate its past for purposes of the present and the future, to confront the construction of its need to confront. Instead it is apparent that the resultant discourse is less a response to Vietnam than a response to the trauma; US culture is moving quickly to fill the chasm that was left in its self-perception and give meaning to that which denied meaning. Thus the Vets' confrontation with a relativistic field of experience and the arbitrary nature of US culture is re-interpreted in terms of a traditional religious crisis. Co-extensive with this has been the classification of Vets in terms of a therapeutic model; to say that they are suffering from PTSD, as if this really signifies anything beyond their incorporation within a field of rational

scientific discourse. In this way Vietnam is once more designated as a field of study through the imposition of a pattern of observation.

It is not immediately obvious that this is happening because the more traditional narrative is masked by a surface acceptance of Vietnam and the Sixties as a watershed event that profoundly altered the character of America. This is the "loss of consensus" argument which states that the period of the Sixties saw a breakdown in the broad political consensus that had reigned throughout the Fifties. In its place the US has evolved towards a more pluralistic worldview that is characterised by competing belief systems in the fields of both domestic politics and foreign policy. This argument is very plausible given the turmoil of the sixties but it ignores the way in which the "loss of consensus" relates only to a surface level of methods and actions, rather than more fundamental attitudes towards the US. This acceptance of the importance of Vietnam masks the way in which the unrest and trauma that surrounded Vietnam is being assumed into a cultural narrative that expresses a set of extremely traditional attitudes about the US and its place in the world. The conservatism that is revealed casts a pall over the glitzy surface of a discourse whose central contention is that Vietnam will not happen again.

Two sociologists, Holsti and Rosenau, have analysed the consensus argument in some depth in two articles.[20] They mailed a questionnaire to representatives of a broad spectrum of leadership roles that ranged from governmental positions to labour leaders, in order to gauge the impact of Vietnam upon decision-making. Their study found an initial agreement that the US should learn from past mistakes, but beyond this there existed deep cleavages in attitude towards the significance of Vietnam and what could be learned from it. Their hypothesis of Vietnam as a watershed tended to be supported by the success of their initial classification: knowing where someone stood on the Vietnam War gave a strong indication of where they

stood on other foreign policy issues. While they acknowledge that the existence of opposed extremes is not in itself an indication of a breakdown in consensus - even the consensus of the forties and fifties had its critics - these dissenting elements represented nearly a third of the sample and are therefore hardly fringe elements. The authors conclude: "These differences appear to be embedded within and sustained by well-defined clusters of supporting beliefs that extend from conceptions of the international system to the most effective means by which the United States should pursue its foreign policy goals."[21]

There are however a number of points about Holsti and Rosenau's methodology that demonstrate the problematic nature of both cultural change and its perception; although the authors are arguing for a loss of consensus, many of their analytical assumptions are founded on a traditional set of beliefs about the way in which US culture operates. Daniel Hallin, in his study of journalistic reporting of the war[22], has argued that the political sphere is divided into three realms: the sphere of consensus (non-controversial beliefs), the sphere of legitimate controversy and the sphere which contains those views that are held to be unworthy of being heard. Most of the questions in Holsti and Rosenau's survey deal with the mechanisms of US involvement, and attitudes towards the rest of the world, without examining whether the core beliefs and self-perceptions of US foreign and domestic policies (Hallin's realm of consensus) have been affected. US involvement in Angola for example, occurring immediately after Vietnam, indicated a change to support for limited military engagement and restraint on spending upon covert activities and client regimes; but fact of involvement in Angola tends to support that the thesis that US perceptions about itself and its place in the world remain unchallenged. In this regard their survey also fails to examine the third political realm to determine whether attitudes to those who were beyond the

pale, (communists, atheists, etc.) have changed. The reason for this may lie in the way in which the form of their research is based upon a very American espousal of individuality. They assume that it is the individuals themselves that wield the power. Individuals in leadership roles however, always act through institutions, and Holsti and Rosenau's work is lacking an analysis of the structural and procedural elements that shape decision-making, as well as of the perceptual modes and categories which permeate institutional functions.

Problems with the consensus theory become even more evident in the second part of their research which examines the idea that the cleavages in belief systems are primarily generational in origin. Broadly, the division is between the World War II "Munich" generation and the Vietnam generation: between isolation and its consequences, and involvement and its consequences. Their description of generational cut-off points is purely arbitrary but it is a pretty safe assumption that the wars of this century represent significant benchmarks. The authors have also placed a special emphasis on late adolescence and early adulthood: this is where belief formation and development takes place, but it also encompasses eligibility for voting and military service - consciousness of and involvement in foreign affairs may thus be heightened by the prospect of personal involvement. Their results however, indicate only moderate support for the generational thesis; instead they tend to indicate that differences within generations are far more significant; that generational identification by itself carries a rather modest load of information about a person, although the task is made easier if the generations are widely separated. Occupations prove far more significant; if a persons's occupation is known, guesses can be made about their socialisation influences such as education, group membership, professional norms and so on.

The major problem with this is one that is admitted by Holsti and Rosenau: they are examining the attitudes of the leadership group that is on its way out, rather than the generation that came of age during the Vietnam war. Their sample does not adequately represent the younger members of the Vietnam generation - those who were of College age during the Vietnam War. This may be an even more serious flaw than the authors realise, because presumably it also excludes large number of those men who actually fought there. It may even be that the impact of Vietnam will be even greater upon those individuals coming of age now, who have access not only to a variety of textual records and memories of the trauma, but also to more information about decisions, policies, and events than was available to those involved; and now also to the same amount of information concerning the US re-examination of all this material. But the reason why the work of Holsti and Rosenau throws up little support for the generational thesis lies in the problematic nature of the term "generation". The assumption that the authors make, one perhaps inscribed within the word itself, is that you <u>can</u> draw lines to designate a temporal categorisation of people. "Generation" implies a fixed point from which other elements are produced or follow - the loose flow of births and deaths makes this impossible. "Generations" are not distinct in time, they merge into one another in just the same way that groups of people do not start anew with their belief patterns, but are extensively socialized by a variety of cultural factors; these may undergo change but not all at once, thus creating a flow-through of certain beliefs: core beliefs about the society. Foreign Policy preferences may change but the core beliefs upon which they are based rarely do.

Lau, Brown and Sears effectively undermine the basis of the fractured consensus theory with their study of civilian attitudes to the Vietnam War.[23] Their starting point is the notion of self-interest. By 1968

almost 30% of the US population had relatives or friends who had served or were serving in Vietnam; theories of self-interest argue that the ever-present possibility that these people could be killed or maimed could be expected to shape attitudes to the war. "The theoretical polarity, then, is between, on the one hand, need-satisfaction or cost-benefit theories which essentially take a drive-reduction point of view - people adopt the attitudes that pay off for them in a reinforcement, incentive, or functional sense - and on the other hand, a non-motivational "symbolic politics" alternative invoking early conditioning plus later consistency - people learn their attitudes early, then interpret later issues in terms of their consistence with earlier attitudes."[24] Simply then, if self-interest prevails, then those whose relatives are exposed to death and injury in Vietnam will be opposed to the war.

The authors found that Vietnam was more salient as a political issue among the self-interested but the statistical correlation was disappointingly weak. They also found, contrary to expectations, that the self-interested with relatives in Vietnam were more likely to feel that the war was the right thing, although the correlation was again weak. Overall, symbolic attitudes proved to be most predictive of attitudes to the war, even to the point of influencing a consistency between attitudes to the war and perceptions of the Presidential candidates and their positions. The authors concluded:

> Whether or not people relate policy issues to their long-standing symbolic commitments depends, therefore, a great deal upon the issue and its symbolic meaning. And it could well be that this ability, or inability, of the public to deal with an issue at a symbolic level has a great deal to do with the effectiveness of governmental policy on it. When the public cannot relate an issue to familiar symbols, either positive or negative, government efforts may simply flounder, as was the case in Vietnam and the energy situations.[25]

There are then, a number of problems with the theory that the post-Vietnam US is suffering from a breakdown in political and social consensus.

The theory of loss of consensus, like notions of self-interest, presumes that humans are rational actors: given the turmoil of the sixties they will experience uncertainty and diversity and learn a variety of different lessons from the US Vietnam experience. Much of the research is thus already weighted towards looking for patterns of diversity rather than coherence. What evidence there is for a loss of consensus is undermined by a tendency to look only at methods and their application, particularly in the foreign policy arena, rather than the system of beliefs and symbols that maintains them.

This insistence upon a loss of consensus is another term for the "malaise" - also known as Post-Vietnam Syndrome - from which, many claimed, the US was suffering throughout the seventies. This decade is widely perceived as a time of weakness and uncertainty where the US proved unable to exert any influence over its domestic economic situation. Here, and in the sphere of international politics, the US seemed to be at the mercy of foreign countries that were able to take advantage of US weakness and walk all over it - in much the same way as the country of Vietnam had done, it seemed. This malaise, this lack of consensus was seen to be a bad thing, something which needed to be overcome, but the bias inherent in this attitude perhaps indicates how little the fundamental consensus had been altered.

This conservatism is especially prevalent amongst many Vets as a result of the many tensions that remain unresolved in their attitudes towards Vietnam. Most Vets acknowledge that a part of themselves bears a strong affection for their experience in Vietnam, and in terms of self-justification this often spills over into a need to affirm the moral correctness of their presence in Vietnam. One example is John Wheeler, a former chairman of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and identified by a 1985 TIME article as Head of the Securities Exchange Commission. He

attempts to come to grips not just with his experience in Vietnam but with the way in which it shaped the experience of a whole generation .

> If the Vietnam War is taken as extending from 1959-1975 (the official date of the first and last American casualties) 30 million women and 30 million men reached draft age during the war; ten million of the men wore the uniform, three million of them went to Vietnam, about 300,000 were wounded and nearly 60,000 died. The big question is how the 60 million of us matured, how we were transformed and divided by our journey to adulthood.[26]

The importance of this generation is obvious when one considers that their active political life will extend well into the 2020's and they will be a decisive factor in the next ten presidential elections. It is not unreasonable to expect that at least some of the presidents will be drawn from the ranks of the Vietnam Vets, as most presidents since Truman have been World War II veterans. The fact that Vietnam has exercised a major influence on these people is therefore very important.

Wheeler accepts that there was a contract of silence,[27] not just within the Vietnam generation but also on the part of many of the World War II generation who were architects of the Vietnam era policies. He sees their silence as reflecting deep division within the culture. Those who were not in uniform feel estranged from those who were, as if they had somehow failed to perform an expected rite of passage. Those who were in uniform feel that they were looked down upon because of it.

> As a Vietnam veteran, I take pride in my service. Like most veterans I believe that going to Vietnam was like going into hell, and that we went in the true spirit of self-sacrifice. But it took years for this self-affirmation to surface and, without it, Veterans experienced an unhealthy separation of self from self. I am thankful this sense of affirmation is spreading.[28]

Wheeler sees this affirmation as having a number of positive results. He argues that Vets are being accorded a late but strong recognition of their contribution and in many cases this is being translated into political authority. Dan Quayle would have been a good example - had he actually

made the contribution he led everyone to believe he'd made. In many ways Quayle stands for all that is outwardly good but inwardly problematic about Wheeler's argument.

Wheeler for example also regards the US as being the first major culture in which men and women share policy-making power - and by anyone's standards the US has a long way to go here. He also sees that the anti-war passions aroused during Vietnam have been insufficiently digested or spent; if an unpopular war broke out a massive protest movement could block successful US participation - this, he implies, would be a bad thing. The problem is that his sense of affirmation often tips over into jingoism.

> Our troops in Vietnam succeeded in eliminating the Viet Cong as a principal adversary in the battle of Tet 1968 and then depleting the North Vietnamese regular forces to the point where the United States could obtain the cease-fire and peace of 1973. This is how young veterans see the results of their ground battles. They know that they accomplished their military task. They know that the slaughter of civilians at My Lai was an exception to the general rule that American soldiers respected the most complex and restrictive rules of engagement ever placed on troops in a battle zone. Those who were staff officers know that they successfully operated the longest and most complex line of military logistics and communication in history. In the eyes of the veterans, these things are a source of pride.[29]

Much of what Wheeler maintains here runs directly counter to the testimony of many Vets. This is hardly surprising as he dismisses the literature on the war as being retrospective rather than introspective or prospective; while it is true that the literature often avoids looking into the future, it is nothing if not introspective.

Wheeler argues that the recent social and political success of the Vet "confirms one of the fundamental attributes of most cultures: that those who put themselves in harm's way for the sake of the community earn the community's respect".[30] This new respect accorded Vets will mean, according to Wheeler, that in the coming decades the US will be the only major world power whose most senior government ranks include a significant number of

men who have experienced war; who possess and understanding of logistics, of the difficulties of reporting and controlling battlefield events, as well as possessing a personal knowledge of the guerilla fighter and of the limits of technology. Whether this bestows any benefit upon US society as a whole is dubious, especially when one considers that it was a generation of similarly experienced World War II men who blundered the US into Vietnam in the first place. Far more men served in the Second World War than in Vietnam, so the effect of their "wisdom" should have been correspondingly greater. Wheeler concludes: "The new respect and emerging political voice accorded Vietnam Veterans illuminates the generation as a whole. It is a confirmation of two values that are fundamental to a strong foreign policy: the principle of honouring our commitments and the belief that there are things worth dying for".[31] It seems a small step from this to a "Better Dead than Red" sort of statement, and sits oddly with Wheeler's claim that Vets show no significant sign of the bitterness that created a hunger for military display in post-World War I Germany. In fact, it can be argued that a dissatisfaction bordering on bitterness with the impotency of the US during the 1970's swept Reagan and a new reactionary conservatism to power in 1980, and has since then manifested itself in massive defence spending, the jingoistic spectacle of the Los Angeles Olympics, and a succession of new military interventions.

Now it may well be that there was a breakdown in consensus within the decision-making elite that came of age in World War II as the result of the foundering of an older ideology in Vietnam, and other literature tends to support this.[32] It is also possible that there was an intellectual lack of consensus amongst Americans at large, but in practical, functional terms, the symbolic level of political thought and motivation prove to have emerged substantially unchanged from the turbulence of the sixties - and it is this irrational level at which people relate to the arena of US politics

that influences people's belief. This gives rise to the conservatism of the Reagan years with its emphasis - surprise, surprise - on the core values and symbols of America: unity, strength, moral fortitude, religion, plain-but-tough-talking, home, the family, chastity and so on. In times of stress the US has always returned to its symbolic, largely Puritan, roots and this conservatism has never been far from the surface of the Vietnam issue. The series of articles run by The Center Magazine, many of which have been quoted here, elicited the following responses from a selection of readers.[33]

> James R. Groundwater talks of "a steady decline of national integrity accompanied by an increasing unreadiness to enforce our laws."[34]
>
> Anthony L. Wermouth claims that "In response to desperate requests from a sovereign nation being unquestionably aggressed against, America shed blood and treasure, as America had done in both World Wars. Though done partly in its own interests, this was, on the whole, a humane and generous performance on our part." Although evoking a wider context for the war he re-invokes a number of classic conservative cliches: "Our forces were not defeated; they were withdrawn."[35]
>
> Alan L. Benosky in a piece strikingly reminiscent of Lau et al states: "Our efforts in Vietnam represent a failure of leadership which neglected to make the war intelligible for Americans It could have been done had our opinion-makers been as enthusiastic about the war as they had been about World War II." He ties this in with an assessment of the US itself: For many years our national ideology and education have tended to erode people's patriotism, loyalty and sense of duty. These values are not as strong as they used to be. Our culture and educational systems have emphasized rights more than obligations, producing a kind of every-man-a-king attitude."[36]

The expression of traditional symbolic attitudes is obvious. This sort of attitude even crops up in the research literature. Smith et al, in their investigation into PTSD conclude: "Research efforts that illuminate this normal process and clarify appropriate interventions facilitating recovery will enrich us all, for the strength and moral character honed in this

process have already begun to lead us from our national post-Vietnam malaise."[37]

The substance of the conservative view is accurate at the same time as its underlying motivation is anachronistic. A lack of consensus does exist in that the US is now a more culturally diverse, pluralistic, fragmented culture than ever before. There has been a loss of the authority vested in universal truths and a calling into question of all the old absolutes. But functionally, on an administrative level, the US retains the ideologies of unity, home, family, etc., in the structures of its institutions and in the minds of those who work within their walls. The fact that the US government is predicated upon a system of checks and balances ensures, however pluralistic the inputs and negotiations within the actual structures, that ideas of consensus and either unified action or no action at all will predominate. While the experience of the culture may be pluralistic, the bureaucratic process by which the government makes its decisions makes sure that all the pluralistic confusion of people's lives is translated into unified, monotheistic policy options. Bureaucracy after all sustains systems of consensus as the cultural enshrinement of a rage for order and procedure.

The most serious implications of the longevity of symbolic politics derive from the conservative attitude towards history. They claim to be returning to History, to be learning from it, both in the sense of returning to fundamental values and processes and re-examining specific issues in a new light: hence the re-examination of Vietnam. But an acceptance of history as an unproblematic field of study, coupled with a denial of the relativism that has evolved as a feature of Western culture means that they are not so much returning to history as escaping from it. By assuming that it is possible to step outside history and analyse it, one only becomes embroiled more deeply in its contradictions. This attitude has manifested

itself in a quest for the "lessons of Vietnam". Like all apocalyptic, revelatory events, Vietnam must be capable of teaching us something. But the idea that we can learn essential, absolute truths from history, other than from within a highly subjective framework, is now extremely problematic - such lessons are, at best, highly selective and usually only of a temporary nature. It is worrying that many of the "lessons" of Vietnam seem to be how to avoid it happening again - and this relates primarily to more efficient military techniques. How To Avoid It Happening Again By Doing It Better Next Time.

An article by David Fromkin and James Chace, appropriately titled "What Are the Lessons of Vietnam"[38] exemplifies many of these points. It is remarkable in that it juxtaposes some insightful comments on the US involvement in Indochina with a subtle, yet virulently reactionary framework for the present. Fromkin and Chace argue that the whole attempt to find lessons in Vietnam is based upon finding a unifying metaphor for the past. For this a consensus about the past must exist. In fact Americans do not all have a similar perception of what happened in Indochina, and this has been created and exacerbated by Governmental ignorance and irrationality, arguments over how the US became involved, and so on. They cite the War Powers Act as an attempt by Congress to learn from history which has not however, restrained President Reagan from military intervention.

The authors talk about the ways in which US involvement distorted Third World realities by viewing them solely as East-West conflicts, but then have this to say:

> What was wrong in backing a weak, corrupt, inefficient regime against a brutally powerful, fanatically puritanical, ruthlessly efficient adversary was that our side was likely to lose.

> It is fundamental that when we intervene abroad we should do so on behalf of a cause powerful enough so that we stand a chance of winning.[39]

Quite apart from perpetuating a number of nasty stereotypes of the Asian enemy and an "us or them" attitude, the implications of this statement are that the US should reserve the right to intervene anywhere in the world based upon whether the US can come out of it looking good or not, rather than considering its effects upon the country or the world as a whole. This type of thinking was behind the invasion of Grenada, which the authors not surprisingly regard as a success. Fromkin and Chace also talk of the "North Vietnamese leadership who, far from giving priority to the quest for prosperity, were prepared to suffer and to impose suffering on their people in order to obtain their objectives."[40] This ignores the fact that the US did the same thing to its "side". It also equates Vietnamese motivations and aspirations unproblematically with those of the US, and smacks of the attitude of those who cite the Boat People and the butchery in Kampuchea as justification for the moral rightness of US intervention in Indochina, without considering that they may be culpable in the savagery of the region after the US withdrew.

The disturbing facet of this article is that it is explicitly aimed at finding lessons from Vietnam to apply to the US experience in Central America. The authors conclude by acknowledging that the lessons from Vietnam are not self-evident.

> The lesson of Vietnam, if there is one, cannot be applied because we still do not agree about what happened. Far from helping to clarify policy issues in Central America or the Middle East, appeals to the lessons of Vietnam merely compound a conflict about current policy with an argument about history. Reference to Vietnam, therefore, is at this point divisive rather than unifying.[41]

There is no need to read between the lines here. Fromkin and Chace are explicit in their denial of history as having any importance for political

decision-making. The unity they are talking about is rather a lack of criticism, a sort of wistfulness that began cropping up in the late seventies, that if everyone would just stop criticising the US and accept that it was a great country then a lot more would get done a lot faster. But globally and within the US consensus and unity function only as illusions. To refuse to attempt to learn any lessons is to succumb to a loss of any sense of history, and a sense of history is perhaps one of the last vestiges of power left open to people. For there are lessons to be learned, even if what we mean by "lessons" and "learning" is now not so unproblematic: lessons about cultural interaction, procedures and assumptions of governments, interaction between groups - even the lesson of the impossibility of stable representational lessons is one which most people in our culture have yet to acknowledge. The alternative favoured by Fromkin, Chace and all those who in subtle and not so subtle ways perceive a loss of consensus and grieve for it, is to let the government do what it likes under the nebulous assumption that it knows best.

The problem is not always one of a deliberate desire to distort; operating under older preconceptions also contributes to a critical conservatism: as is evident, for example, in Caputo's introduction. "This book does not pretend to be history. It has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests or foreign policy; nor is it an indictment of the great men who led us into Indochina and whose mistakes were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men" (RW, p. xiii). Of course the book has much to do with everything that Caputo denies here, and the implication, shared by most Vet literature, that a personal account is somehow more truthful, politically and theoretically innocent is one that is not supportable in the present US cultural context. The facts do not speak for themselves, they are extremely complicated puppets that can be made to appear to move rather simply and obediently; and the apoliticism of

Caputo and others surrenders this power unopposed to forces of cultural appropriation, human and mechanistic, and to "the forces of history" which are very far from being an innocent determinism.

The "crisis" of Vietnam is part of an Old World literal fixation with truth and meaning which has proved replicatory rather than revelatory. A critique of US involvement in Indochina is thus deeply flawed by a lack of self-reflection, in every sense of the term. The perception of Vietnam as a religious crisis and a national trauma, as a failure of national will, focuses almost exclusively on what that decade was, rather than how it was, and is, seen to be what it was. It ignores the way in which Western, and particularly US culture in the postwar period has steadily evolved in the direction of constituting itself as being in a state of perpetual crisis. So the current re-examination of US involvement in Vietnam argues that Vietnam was the crisis of postwar culture and ignores the way in which culture continually feeds off the spectacle of crises, even to the point of positing the re-examination process itself as one of crisis.

It is understandable that many people, Vets in particular, may feel uncomfortable with a discussion of the political aspects of the war, for fear that it will stir up bad memories, literally rattle a few skeletons and maybe obscure current issues. But that obscuration is taking place anyway, in such a way as to blind many people to the US cultural processes, particularly the tendency of the present to engulf the past and turn it into spectacle, appropriating it for its own purposes. This of course has political and ideological aspects that cannot be separated from the cultural ones and indeed often seem to hide behind them. All the post-structuralist theory that stresses the way in which we do not write but are written has fallen on deaf ears. For we are written, culturally, aesthetically, morally, and ultimately politically. And it is more than cheap conspiracy theory that leads one to believe that the whole

confrontation with the "evil" of Vietnam is being used to seemingly close the book on the past, while at the same time the page is prepared, and the material already written for another chapter in an older narrative.

WE GOTTA GET OUTTA THIS PLACE...

It was a matter of hard observation. Separating illusion from reality....Doc was right about that. He was right, too, that observation requires inward-looking, a study of the very machinery of observation - the mirrors and filters and wiring and circuits of the observing instrument.

Insight, vision. What you remember is determined by what you see, and what you see depends on what you remember. A cycle, Doc Peret had said. A cycle that has to be broken. And this requires a fierce concentration on the process itself: Focus on the order of things, sort out the flow of events so as to understand how one thing led to another, search for that point at which what happened had been extended into a vision of what might've happened. Where was the fulcrum? Where did it tilt from fact to imagination?

Going After Cacciato, p. 198.

The words and pictures of Vietnam are ghosts, alive as anything dead and unreal can be; they exist as images but interact with the world only through our perceptions of, and relations to, the illusion of their presence. There have been several factors that have prompted a renewed US interest in the period of the Vietnam war: Vets demands for special recognition of their adjustment problems, a cultural context imbued with a new nationalistic confidence, a more general re-examination of the Sixties, and perceived similarities between Vietnam and the next likely arena for US intervention, Central America. By far the most influential single factor, even though they cannot be separated from the cultural climate from which they are derived, is the appearance of the various films on Vietnam: primarily Platoon and Full Metal Jacket but more recently Hamburger Hill, Gardens of Stone and Good Morning Vietnam. These films are all striking portrayals of the Vietnam "experience" and have served as vehicles upon which to mount a diverse range of discussions concerning US involvement in

Vietnam. The films themselves however, tend to exhibit a markedly unproblematic attitude toward their status as yet more visual representations of a war that was so extensively, and particularly visually, represented. There have been few attempts to relate these films to previous films that dealt with Vietnam, or to the larger context of films that have been released since the Vietnam war; also lacking is criticism of the way in which the new Vietnam films depend for their impact upon a larger familiarity with images of Vietnam that have permeated our culture. For in the wider cultural context, the thing that has been summoning all the ghosts from where they've been hiding, if indeed they have been, is the one spectre of Vietnam that never died: a culture of media saturation, glutted with information, intrapenetrated with overdetermined images and ephemeral meanings.

There is a strong link between this media saturation and informational overload, and what has come to be known as the cult of the spectacle. The spectacular, as Hal Foster remarks, is central to a great deal of postmodern artistic production. "In the commodity and spectacle all types of productive labour and material support are erased; they fascinate us because they exclude us, place us in the passive position of the dreamer, spectator, consumer".[1] Foster argues that our society is, in particular, fascinated with images of fascism, whether it be on the grand scale of cultural production appropriated by fascism, or in terms of a reactionary individualism. This fascination with the spectacle compensates for the "loss of the real" (the lack of distinction between subject and object, mass and individual, pop and high culture, the ungrounding of traditional cultural distinctions) during the rise of consumerism in the fifties; in Freudian terms, a fetish object has been made of the period preceding this - the period of the Depression and the heyday of Nazism, but also the nationalistic rhetoric and symbols of the New Deal (imaged to some extent

by most countries during this period, although most intensely in Nazi Germany, Italy, Spain and the US) and the invigorating spectacle of nations banding together in wartime.

Foster's description of the spectacle makes it obvious that the spectacle itself possesses many of the attributes of fascism. One thinks of Nazis at Nuremburg: lines, symmetry, order, human and musical orchestration, individuality submerged within the powerful collective mass; a spectacle that places us in "the passive position of the dreamer, spectator, consumer" with all material support apparently erased. It is a grandeur that achieves its full effect not from participating, but from watching; this observance, indeed the power of the spectacle is fully realised as spectacle when it is filmed. So our society is not so much fascinated by images of fascism as it is mesmerised by the fascist nature of the spectacle. It is not merely images themselves that compensate for the lack of the real, but the way in which they are presented.

Fascism relates to the paradoxical attainment of an enhanced individuality through a surrender to the communal mass. It has quasi-religious elements and the relationship to objects, aesthetic and political is characteristic of iconography; certain values, structures, institutions and personages are enshrined within or as images, which themselves take on a sacred character: pictures of the leader, national symbols and quotations, words of the leader and so on. Fascism, as is the case with all ideologies also employs history in order to constitute itself as ideology: confining the flux of events into a narrative that portrays experience as a logical sequence involving the slow revelation of the logic of the particular ideology.

The spectacular, with its fascist tendencies is manifested in a diversity of cultural forms ranging from the spectacular presentations of Phillip Glass and Robert Wilson through MTV and cable television to the big

budget musicals such as Les Miserables and Phantom of the Opera. On the political level it can be seen in the US public's fascination with the spectacle of corruption - Watergate, Irangate etc.: what seems to outsiders like self-flagellation in the form of a public airing of the dirtiest laundry, is not so much a desire to get at the truth (neither the Watergate nor Irangate hearings have), but to indulge in the spectacle of Wrongdoing, perhaps, as Foster says, to revel masochistically in the degree to which these events reveal that the public, and the tenets of democracy have been excluded or ignored.

The spectacle comes into its own in postmodern culture because it benefits from an advanced level of technology, not only to create its illusions, but to erase the evidence of their creation; to present us with apparently "seamless" images and products. It is this fascination with perfection expressed through increasingly complicated and visually startling images, such as those found in Rock videos, that characterises postmodern popculture. Bernard Sharratt provides an analysis of forms of popular entertainment from 19th century melodrama to (post)modern television culture.[2] Sharratt limits his definition to the working class but it is obvious that many of the entertainments that he lists are patronised by all classes. While Sharratt acknowledges that his analysis is merely a starting platform, and seems to by-pass a more comprehensive theory of representation and audience-performer relationships, his study raises questions about the ways in which we relate to popular entertainment; it also has strong links with Foster's treatment of the spectacle with its fascist impulse. Sharratt's theory suggests that popular entertainment is not escapist in the conventional sense. Indeed, large numbers of popular entertainment forms seem to involve the experience of an actual or vicarious fear; the circus, fairground rides, horror films,

war films, disaster movies, supernatural terror films, even some sporting events.

Two characteristics of popular entertainment are evident most clearly in relation to sporting events, but upon reflection, in other cultural forms as well. The first is that the spectator is always their own expert; the sports watcher knows what the referee and players ought to do. This assumption of spectator expertise is also pandered to in many other popular entertainment forms: quiz programmes, games shows, and even the news. While viewing TV programmes, and to a lesser extent while watching films in the cinema, the viewer will often pass asides to fellow viewers, or address the characters and action on the screen, even to the extent of offering advice (as in 19th century melodrama) of the "look out behind you" variety.

The second characteristic of popular entertainment is that the spectator will often claim knowledge of the performers as persons, to a degree that may even approach the level of a personal friendship: referring to the performer by his/her first name, demonstrating a knowledge of their family, and so on. This is the obviously the case with sporting heroes but also manifests itself in a fascination with the most trivial and banal details of the lifestyles of the rich and famous, and with the Western adulation for British royalty. "What is perhaps being displaced, or compensated for, here is a relative lack of kinds of knowledge elsewhere. Since the people who actually control our society are not known personally to many of us, and since the systematic nature of that control is itself difficult to grasp, it may become important to assert an expertise and quasi-acquaintance-ship in areas which at least masquerade as important".[3]

The form of popular entertainment that embodies these characteristics most fully is the News. The presentation of events is geared toward a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) dichotomising of situations, placing them in the context of traditional narratives and frameworks; current

affairs presentation extends to the viewer the implication that s/he has considerably more knowledge concerning a given situation than they may actually possess. The assumption is that the viewer can be presented with the "facts" and make an informed, reasoned judgement based upon carefully weighed alternatives.

This is, of course, completely false; the alternatives are not weighed, but rather weighted before they reach the viewer. The presentation of "issues" upon which a judgement (often, it seems, with heavy biblical overtones) needs to be pronounced is itself a valorisation, the need to make a judgement is not an objective fact but rather a product of the presentation of "news". Such a judgement is not hard to make as the "facts" often amount to little more than the most readily marketable packets of sensation, stripped of all contextual ties, other than those the media selects to highlight. This is coupled with the intensely visual nature of "news" presentation where everything revolves around the enhancement of the film images - the frontperson's speech is mere introduction to visuals, rather than a distinct commentary, and this is underscored by the widespread practice of displaying a picture, graphic, or even the channel logo for the items for which there is no actual film; if it is an ongoing "story" these static visuals preserve a sense of continuity with earlier footage and help to give the issue a recognisable identity in the viewers mind. In the same way a film "voice-over" could be more accurately termed a "voice-under"; the application of the original term may have reflected a niggling doubt that the image was out of control, needed checking by the "presence" of a voice, but in fact the term also points to the secondary nature of the voice, which now serves as no more than a disembodied prop for a suite of images that have already been edited for maximum impact within given time constraints; the voice seems to

have the authority that it has always assumed through the ages, but it has suffered a textual displacement and now derives its authority from the image.

The low degree of reality of the filmic representation[4] enables the viewer to fit the remainders of reality that masquerade as objective fact into a personal narrative. This is abetted by the way in which the "news" exploits a cult of intimacy: through interchangeable talking heads that may, nevertheless, achieve a kind of star, or even superstar (Walter Cronkite/Dan Rather) status; the TV interview, where the words and pictures seem to be directed at the viewer, but are in fact slightly off-centre in order to take in the media representative posing the right questions; the items on stars and royalty that are often separated from gossip only by the respectability of being labelled as "news"; and the portrayal of events as always conflicts (accommodation is boring and not very spectacular) between personalities. On a more basic level, the "news" serves one of the functions of 19th century melodrama in its vivid and spectacular portrayal of crisis and catastrophe.

The example of the "news" highlights some of the mechanisms of spectator involvement with modes of popular entertainment; it does not explain their continued popularity, which must stem from a perceived relevance to the lives of people who watch them. Sharratt demonstrates this sense of relevance in relation to 19th century melodrama - conventionally regarded as being the most simple form of escapist entertainment - and extends this to a discussion of the TV spectacle. If, he says, we accept that working class existence was, and is, one characterised by a great deal of uncertainty, where even the slightest fluctuation in one economic variable could mean the difference between just getting by and abject poverty, then the plot of the melodrama is strikingly familiar - initial brief security, through long and various perils to

re-established security.[5] The importance of melodrama lies not so much in an escape into it, as an escape back into the world, away from the play's perils and dangers. Sharratt likens this to the modern relationship with television:

> Television may provide an escapist avenue into a beautiful and impossible fantasy-world at times, but perhaps the main form of "escapism" it offers is that repeated escape back into our own, safely familiar and familial living room: whatever insecurities, fears or problems hover over our actual situation we are less at risk than in the world that glows through the darkness from the set in the corner.[6]

In our existence, dangers, terrors and insecurities, whether social or economic, often seem to inhabit a parallel world capable of interacting unexpectedly with the domestic one; television's images of violence and disorder, also seem to exist in a parallel dimension, but one whose horror can be dismissed with the flick of a switch.

It is obvious that there are gaps in Sharratt's thesis. There remain the people who feel compelled to check the doors and windows after seeing a horror movie; for them the alternative reality does not evaporate as readily. There is also the confusion that TV creates in people's minds between what purports to be real and what is unreal. The "News", for example, claims its representations to be truthful. But with news slots placed side by side with sitcoms, dramas, game shows and a massive number of adverts (that range from the exhortational to the informational) a number of perceptual modes can quickly become scrambled. It is possible that the demands of adverts, for instance, that we buy and consume, spill over into imitations of style and behaviour, such as with those programmes that enforce violence as a positive ideal; conversely, world leaders are evaluated by viewers (abetted by media presentations) as if they were participants in a soap opera, and so on.

What is important here is the ambiguous role of TV in extending a perceptual power to viewers while leaving them effectively powerless. As

has already been noted, one of the attractions of TV is that it gives us control over an alternative "reality", a simulacrum of the random, invisible forces that govern our lives. To this can be added the freedom to appropriate - because TV's experience appears to parallel that of our own visual interpretation of events we are free to assemble and interpret it in any way that we choose. The paradox is that those who live by the box die in front of it. As Sharratt recognises, there are extensive overtones of ideological control involved in popular entertainment. It is not that popular entertainment is intrinsically inferior in quality to "real" art, critical art, but that popular entertainment extends only an ersatz form of power and self-action to those who are its subjects, providing nothing substantial with which to action the desires that it arouses; leaving, often enough, only violence as the last resort of the powerless.[7] At the root of all popular entertainments, from melodrama to the majority of television programmes, is the assumption that this world can be made to seem not so bad in comparison to possible worlds. These entertainments discourage active questioning of the structures of this world in favour of an aquiescence in its processes; cultivating a belief that normality is tolerable if only barely, and desirable if only cruelly; denying pursuit of alternative worlds by furnishing the means of their disposal, as well as sanctioning imaginative processes that lead only to a consumptive transcendence of violence and fear.

A discussion of the representational qualities of television and its interaction with the family sitting room may well seem a long way from the discussion on the recent spate of films on Vietnam, or the resurrection of a discourse on US involvement with Vietnam. But more people will see these films, and probably see them more often, on video than they will in a movie theatre. Just as "live" theatre lost out to film, so film is losing out to video, because video is everything that people want from film, but on their

own terms, on their own turf. This illusion of control marks television as an important element, perhaps the most important, in US culture's fascination with spectacle. Foster's discussion implies that spectacle is not merely a matter of scale and expense, a play of grand illusions that overawes us with its dimensions; spectacle is, rather, a state of mind, a perceptual relationship between a consumer and an image-product. The impact of television derives from its reinforcement of a larger sense of cultural spectacle. To own a television set is thus an individual act that plugs the owner/viewer into a complex cultural matrix. On the one hand this connection becomes the major source of the transmission of cultural values and images, a shared medium that serves to link almost all members of a culture which itself comes to depend on a degree of TV literacy. At the same time, television places viewers at one remove from a sense of culture; culture unfolds as spectacle before which people are passive, the only illusion of involvement is the tenuous connection provided by the flickering insubstantiality of the TV screen.[8]

The relationship to culture and the relationship to many of its media forms thus seems to be characterised by a fascination with spectacle which in turn is inhabited by impulses that have certain links with fascism. This is the context for the resurgence of interest in Vietnam. A vital component of fascist rhetoric is the attainment of a collective power that will enable people to recover something that was lost; in the case of the US there are a variety of perceived losses that occurred during the seventies; the loss of the Vietnam war, a loss of "innocence", a loss of prestige, a loss of economic stability, a general loss of confidence and assertiveness. Fascism however, does not recover these losses but merely compensates for them in much the same way, if Sharratt is correct, that TV serves the ideological ends of aquiescence and maintenance of the status quo. This aspect of seeming to grant power while in fact denying it is

important in analysing the recent film attempts to capture the Vietnam "experience", because it is linked with the way in which the problematic aspects of US involvement in Vietnam are being incorporated within an older style of national mythology. The Vietnam films' lack of awareness of the representational qualities of big and small screen and the relationship of their subject-matter and style to a sense of cultural spectacle, mark the endeavours of Kubrick and Stone also as less a confrontation with the US past than a reconciliation with its mythologies.

The idea of US culture as a constant process of self-reconciliation is hardly new but seems to be one which is particularly relevant to the US film industry. While aesthetic and ethical values are not absent from Hollywood, they are peripheral, or at best secondary, to the process of making money. Because the primary concern is economic gain, there has been a tendency since the Sixties for Hollywood to produce films that deal directly or indirectly with the flawed nature of (US) society, a matter of increasing concern for many people, but in such a way that they flirt with the issue, playing on people's insecurities in such a way as to reinforce cultural values and ideals.[9] For this reason the assumption that the Vietnam films represent a meaningful confrontation with US history needs to be carefully questioned. For if one examines the films that have been popular in the US since the early Seventies, it places the Vietnam films in a context that has been less confrontational than compensatory.

In the early seventies one sees the appearance of the disaster films. While not quite a genre, they formed a definite cycle and a person going to see a disaster film knew pretty much what to expect. The films themselves were extremely profitable and Hollywood has, as Nick Roddick points out,[10] rarely succeeded in sustaining variations on a formula for so long. The film industry failed, for example with the string if violent films that

followed The Dirty Dozen in 1966 and the "youth movies" that tried to cash in on the success of Easy Rider. So obviously the films pandered to some basic need in their audience. Roddick argues that "the movies are worth studying in detail because they give clear indications of how a cultural industry reacts to a period of economic and political crisis in capitalist society, and how culture can become ideologically active. Disaster movies are 'reactionary culture' par excellence".[11] Although culture is always ideologically active, what distinguishes reactionary culture is its readiness to actively exploit the fascist tendencies within the spectacle.

Disaster and catastrophe appear in many different types of film but, according to Roddick, if the film is to be classified as a disaster movie the disaster must be central and indiscriminate in that it could happen to all sections of the population, not just certain professions. It must also be unexpected - although not necessarily unpredicted - and all-encompassing. Most importantly it must be ahistorical: no specific conjunction of economic and political forces are required to bring it about. The modern cycle of disaster films really gets underway with The Poseidon Adventure in 1972; Juggernaut, Earthquake, The Towering Inferno, Airport 1975 (all 1974); The Hindenburg (1975); The Big Bus (a parody in 1976) and Airport '77 (1977). The emphasis in these films is on the reaction to the disaster more than the disaster itself. What the audience is presented with is spectacular entertainment but also a didactic lesson.

The constituent elements of these films are important for the way in which they present the audience with a recognisable world which nevertheless conforms to a rather simplistic version of everyday life. The situation of the characters is one of isolation - ships, planes, tall buildings - where normal means of escape have been rendered impossible. The characters are often surrounded by a luxurious setting which serves a

two-fold purpose: it adds to the spectacle of the film, particularly when it is destroyed, and allows a wish-fulfilling indulgence in and celebration of the capitalist world; at the same time the sumptuousness demonstrates that such luxury is a dangerous delusion and that the technology that supports it is incapable of withstanding elemental forces. The characters are a random gathering of people - who, nevertheless, are also recognised as "stars". There are no complex relations between them and interaction occurs between stereotypes -the frustrated wife, the crook on the run -extended by the "known" personality of the star which often appears so much more substantial. At the outset these interactions are characterised by conflict; what is interesting here is that the audience by and large knows that it is going to be watching a disaster movie and the suspense is generated by waiting to see not only which stars get it, but also the thrill of being able to judge who "deserves" to get it.

Roddick argues that the presentation of the world before the disaster reflects a contemporary phobia generated by the political, economic and social uncertainty of the time, a fear that traditional values are either threatened or have collapsed.

> It is a society which has lost sight of "frontier values", has grown weak through excessive self-indulgence and total reliance on a protective shell of technology, whose moral codes are threatened by liberalism and permissiveness, and whose institutions have been diverted from their original purpose: instead of protecting the collective and providing a firm foundation for individual initiative, they now frustrate initiative and act as a safety net for the weak, the incompetent and even the criminal.[12]

The disaster is merely a means of effecting a transformation of the world. There is no suggestion, as with the horror film for example, of things "getting back to normal". Rather the suggestion is of a new world, purged of certain aspects, with an alternative structure erected in its place.

The key action in the film is that of banding together in a collective in the wake of the disaster. The strong protect the weak and wounded, the

men protect the women. There emerges a natural leader - white, male, and usually, as Roddick notes, wearing a uniform. Thus the groups of survivors are led by pilots, navy officers, policemen, fire chiefs, priests and bus drivers. In the wake of the disaster it is also common to see the resurrection of the technology that has been called into question but now in the safe and reliable hands of the new leader. The new hero thus has all the masculine attributes of the old coupled with a technical knowledge - which is not however, to be confused with what is seen to be the obsessive and destructive objectivity of the scientist. Thus the disaster transforms the world and the new leader takes up the reins. The wicked are punished and so are the weak, except for those who have the excuse of being infant, elderly or female. The film presents a simplistic social Darwinism, implying that complexity of motivation and problematic social solutions are products of degeneracy.

Roddick sees this as reflecting a corporatist worldview, but his language also reveals the elements of fascist ideology that are contained within the film.

> Such men who in the normal, liberal, capitalist, democratic run of things have risen to positions of power through commercial enterprise or by due (or even undue) process of election are, it is implied, not fit to run society. Business acumen is no guarantee of leadership potential, and the mass electorate no judge of it. More efficient methods of selection are called for. Our leaders have been shown to be wanting at times of crisis. This fear, fuelled by Watergate and exploited by the "super-cop" cycle, is evidently a very real one. And disaster movies respond to it in a typically demagogic fashion: by portraying the transfer of power from the old, the incompetent and the corrupt to the new race of super heroes, brave, morally upright and technologically brilliant. Behind them the people can be united into a corporate identity, free from the divisions and the individual selfishness which characterised them before the disaster.[13]

The films are not as overtly fascist as Nazi rhetoric and images; nevertheless they possess a set of powerful assumptions that derive as

naturally from the Oil Shocks and ensuing Energy Crisis as the Nuremburg rallies sprang from the financial collapse of the Weimar Republic. The films simplify complex cultural problems and play upon a desire for unity and for an ideologically and morally pure society. Like Nazism, disaster films express a yearning for a society purged of the inefficient, weak and corrupt people who are seen to be running our society - but in the American egalitarian spirit, these people are not to located merely in one ethnic group. Of course the degree of ideological simplification in these films means that they are primarily wish-fulfilments; offering no real possibility of self-actualisation beyond the experience of the film. Rather they reinforce a passivity in the face of traditional role models,[14] a surrender of will and judgement that is abetted by the audience's willingness to surrender themselves to the spectacular indulgence of these films. Disaster movies represent a successful coincidence of the fascism that is inherent in the spectacle and a reactionary politics.

It is hardly coincidental that what followed the cycle of disaster films was another cycle that relied on the creation of spectacle and a willingness to be submerged within its grandeur: the third wave of science-fiction films that appeared as a result of the runaway success of Star Wars. Predictably, Star Wars was as good as these films ever got. Films such as Battlestar Galactica and Close Encounters are visually, rich but critically they pale into insignificance beside the sci-fi films of the Sixties and early Seventies - 2001, Soylent Green, Zardoz, THX 1138 - which examine problematic future societies that are reflections of our own. They expressed a concern for conservation and the utilisation of resources, the creeping influence of totalitarianism, the extent of our submission to technology, particularly communications technology. The films after Star Wars however rely almost completely on the spectacle that is created by their technological capability to make sci-fi look "real". They are grand,

dramatic and spectacular; reference to them as "space opera" captures well their appeal while indicating also the existence of story-lines and a critical perspective that is as simplified and well-worn as that of traditional opera. At the same time, these films rely heavily on a nostalgia for earlier sci-fi films and comic books: they are filled with quotes, allusions and in-jokes designed to delight scene-watchers. Nostalgia is a vital component of fascism and here it combines with the spectacular to create a vision that masquerades as apolitical, reflecting little more than a yearning for a world that is morally simple, where good and evil are readily distinguishable and diametrically opposed. Star Wars preserves a continuity with the disaster films in that it extends to the audience an illusion of self-action: it posits the need to discern and combine the "good" halves of both technology and metaphysics against their "evil" halves. For the remainder of this cycle of films, the distinction is unproblematic, and the sophisticated technology involved enforces a passivity, both excluding the viewer and burying its own political assumptions.

Disaster films and science-fiction represented the two major filmic trends during the seventies and certainly the major box-office successes, but there appeared also a second strand of cinema. Although never as popular, the fact that it appeared at all, served to indicate how extreme was the perception of a crisis within the US. A fascination/horror with the dark and corrupt underbelly of the US characterises films such as The Godfather (1972), The Parallax View, All the President's Men, and Network (1976). These films were also a response to the fears and insecurities of Americans at the time, but unlike the palliative reaction of the disaster and sci-fi films, were deeply critical of US institutions, and as critical of "the system" as one is likely to get from Hollywood. The Parallax View and Network present us with traditional heroes who take on corrupt big

business, as generations of Hollywood heroes have done - and get creamed. The Godfather provided a glimpse of a state within a state, characterised by corruption and criminality and made all the more chilling by the fact that the Mafia was presented as succeeding because they had adopted values of home family, and free enterprise more completely than most Americans.

In amongst these films there emerged the first of the Vietnam films, all in 1978: Apocalypse Now, The Boys in Company C, Coming Home, and The Deer Hunter. The boys in Company C was a dressed up WWII combat narrative that seemed to realise Vietnam possessed some significance but couldn't decide exactly what it was. Coming Home likewise starts out exploring the way in which Vietnam changed the US but founders in a sea of liberal self-justification. Lacking the textual background of a dozen Vet's memoirs, documentaries, TV movies and interviews against which to situate themselves, the impact of Apocalypse Now and The Deer Hunter was vague and ill-defined. The two films did not provide images to complement the words and they still don't. Yet the concern of both films is somewhat larger than merely showing how it was.

The Deer Hunter received a number of Academy awards but also a great deal of criticism which labelled the film as hideously reactionary and racist, not to mention jingoistic in the extreme. It is all of these, and its portrayal of helpless GI's held in Tiger cages by barbarous captors may have had some basis in the experience of POW's, but is presented in the film as being symbolic of the Vietnamese character. John Pilger in a New Statesman review[15] argues that compared to The Deer Hunter, The Green Berets was an honest film: its B-grade techniques were visible to all but the most fanatically patriotic. The Deer Hunter, on the other hand, possesses a slickness that hides its reactionary politics beneath a cinema verité surface.

There are times when, even by the film's own standard, the

> slick runs precariously thin; the strong, silent, Batman-jawed Robert De Niro and the brave, sensitive, baby-faced Boy Wonder Christopher Warren [ok, so he got it wrong, it was Christopher Walken] could not merely suffer in captivity as soldiers; no, the Dynamic Duo get away by wiping out a house-full of their captors, mighty M-16's rotating from their hips. Pow! Wham! Rat-tat-tat! "C'mon, letsgetout-tahere!" ad nauseum. Big John would have shown them how it was really done.[16]

On this level the film argues all too clearly that an innocent America was sucked into the conflict by a corrupt Vietnam but just managed to extricate itself in time. The film closes with a communal singing of "God Bless America" that was enough to send radical critics running retching from the cinema.

The film came out at a time when Vietnam was being victimised by the international community for its role in the Indochina conflict.

> The "new patriotism" and the mood of national redemption decree that it is time the American conscience was salved and the Vietnamese "punished" for defeating and humiliating the greatest power on earth. Last month Vietnam was attacked by America's new ally China, on the pretext that the Vietnamese were the stooges of Moscow. The American government condemned the action with all the force of a verbal leg-slap, while linking it, astutely, to a condemnation of Hanoi's overthrow of the genocidal regime in Cambodia: there was no mention that Cambodia had attacked Vietnam in 1977.[17]

At the time of its release the jingoistic elements of The Deer Hunter prevailed, but viewing it now, especially in relation to other Vietnam offerings, it is perhaps possible to see a reluctant subtext emerging that may not have been visible at the time. In an overview of the 1978 crop of Vietnam films, John Shannon makes an interesting comment about ideology and film-making.

> Deeply conservative art, like Deerhunter, is too busy justifying the present to analyse it, Liberal art, like Coming Home is too busy justifying its own attitudes to notice the present. And, sad but true, most of the radical art is caught when the flare goes up with both eyes set on the future, trying hard, thinking deeply, hardly touching the present. It's only the reactionaries who seem to reach down and touch the earth - and find it coming up shit in their hands.[18]

Although the separation of conservative and reactionary art seems problematic, Shannon's comments point to the way in which reactionary/conservative art forms often express some of the more fundamental contradictions of society, often in spite of themselves. In this light The Deer Hunter is still reactionary and racist, but other elements in the film serve to undercut its attempts at jingoism.

In many ways The Deer Hunter is not a film about Vietnam at all. Only three quarters of an hour of the film's three hour running time is set in Vietnam and most of that is in the almost unrecognisable wastes of Saigon's human jungle. But as Herr says, "There'd been nothing happening there that hadn't already existed here, coiled up and waiting, back in the World".[19] At the same time as The Deer Hunter is intent on clarifying the issue of US involvement, it portrays many of the aspects of US culture which helped to create and sustain the confusion in the first place. It may, for example, have been the intention of director Michael Cimino that the cinema verité style glorify the men, creating a sort of poetry of the commonplace. But the technique also ensures that the characters retain a certain inscrutability that makes it difficult for the viewer to identify with them completely. There is an interesting tension within the film in that the naturalistic style that reproduces action and speech as "realistically" as possible creates a film where beneath the copious quantities of discourse there often seems to be very little - or a great deal - going on. The actions and motivations of the characters are almost impervious to our gaze and we are forced to put our own construction on their actions. Robert De Niro may come across as a Superman, performing amazing physical feats in order to rescue his friends, but he is a superhero that is more empty than any comic book drawing - we can see what he does, but we have little idea why. The film reveals the same postmodern tendencies that led to the fragmentation of language into a series of private idiolects and a

breakdown in the conventions of coherent narrative - the very processes that led to the Vet's inability to describe his experiences and communicate it to others; a singular manifestation of a wider cultural tendency.

Film critic Pauline Kael[20] dismisses the film as an exhaustive study of male bonding where the Victorian ideal of war as a test of man's courage is resurrected and reaffirmed. Rather it is these values that are portrayed in the film as ideologically false and inapplicable in a modern context. The male bonding is highly problematic and centres around the machismo of the deer hunt - a burnt out leftover of the US' frontier mythology, a myth of wilderness redemption that is momentary only and completely at odds with the men's urban existence as factory workers. The men believe in a bonding between them which does not exist; their relationship to each other is fraught with tensions and suppressed violence that sometimes erupts in open, if inexplicable conflict. Even on the hunting trip the men are brought into conflict, and each man hunts alone.

The action of the men while hunting betrays their lack of respect for life, and it is ostensibly this lesson that Robert De Niro learns through his ordeal in Vietnam - the famous scene where De Niro and Christopher Walken are forced to play Russian Roulette against each other for their lives. It seems obvious that Cimino invented the Vietnamese penchant for this game. Pilger says that while he was over there he never came across the game, nor did any of the correspondents that he knew. It is also never mentioned in any of the Vet's texts. The film thus makes it seem as if the Vietnamese gamble on life as easily as the British gamble on the pools. But Russian Roulette is also important in a symbolic context. It represents the other side of the lesson, that which sends Walken over the edge, turning him into a drugged professional Roulette player in the back streets of Saigon.[21] The lesson for Walken is that everyone is expendable and fundamentally valueless; in a world where everyone treats

life as if it doesn't mean anything, it doesn't. The Russian Roulette motif also carries the implication that in terms of its attitudes toward the rest of the world the US has been playing with a loaded gun throughout its history.

The film lacks an epiphanal moment. Sonny's encounter with the deer in which he (deliberately?) misses and it escapes, is another private, idiosyncratic moment, and the patriotic singing at the end of the film verges on hollow mockery, its communitarian impulse undercut by the problematic nature of the connections (or lack thereof) between the people. The film shows that an inability of people to relate to each other before the war was amplified during it by the vastly different experiences of those who fought and those who remained at home. The Deer Hunter also gives us glimpses of the postmodern processes of cultural fragmentation and privatisation that helped to make the experiential connections difficult. On one level the film exhibits a profound conservatism, but in endeavouring to show the US as it really is, it also reveals a host of contradictions that serve to undermine the reductive aspects of the conservative worldview.

Apocalypse Now is a completely different type of film and one that was fundamentally misunderstood at the time of its release. The film has an anti-realistic form but many viewers mistakenly regarded this as surreal with the nested linguistic assumption (sur = above, therefore, higher reality) that this surrealism was supposed to re-present, the "realness" of Vietnam. Others merely dismissed the film as melodramatic, excessive and indulgent - the last perhaps in reference to Marlon Brando's incoherent and frequently inaudible monologues that occupy the latter part of the film. The critics miss the point that Apocalypse Now is not a portrayal of the fighting man's experience of the war, but that of the TV viewer. On one hand the film is laughing behind its hand at its inherent representational

falsity, on the other it is deadly serious, just as these representations were and are deadly serious. The explicitly mythic structure of the film argues that most Americans' experience of Vietnam, and their belief in the truth of that experience was obtained through TV spectacle: images of violence, holocaust, grandeur and personal corruption merging in people's minds until Vietnam disappeared into the heart of a Conrad paradigm scored by Wagner.

The multi-level images contained in Apocalypse Now indicate the unusual cultural and perceptual juxtapositions that were forced by Vietnam - the Playboy helicopter descending to give a show in the heart of the jungle - and because they have some basis in legendary fact, they also serve as critical comment - the Playboy show links the ideas of sexual exploitation, rampant desire, male violence and economic and cultural exploitation. Yet the images are almost too over the top to be believed, and the riot that forces the abrupt closure of the Playboy show is both possible and improbable, forcing us back to the problematic nature of its existence as a visual image.

The best example of this duplicitous realism is the well-known scene where the Cavalry choppers sweep in to attack the Vietnamese village with Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" spewing from door-mounted speakers. Graphic violence alternates with bizarre disjunctures - men surfing amidst bursting shells, and a telling cameo by Coppola himself, as the director of a film crew who exhorts a confused Martin Sheen, "Go on! Go on! Look as if you're fighting!". This gives way to the image of the Cavalry commander (Robert Duvall) striding across the beach while his men cower and shells burst all around him - a self-conscious parody of all the gung-ho, not-afraid-of-a-little-gunfire war heroes we have ever seen. Yet the moment retains just enough of a sense of reality; it is an image of life imitating art, art imitating life, life imitating art imitating life....[22]

The film's use of an older narrative, Conrad's Heart of Darkness, is explicit and acknowledged, unlike the use of narrative paradigms in more recent films. Coppola's choice of this particular narrative to reinscribe is extremely important. As Jameson points out: "This whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world..." Apocalypse Now is thus making the connection between the massive European imperialist/expansionist phase around the turn of the century and the American expansion into Vietnam. Just as there are similarities there are also differences. US imperialism represents the new methods of penetration of the Third World that have been made possible by the emergence of multinational capitalism, as opposed to the more nation-specific imperialist capitalism that Conrad was writing about.

The imperialism that derives from multinationalism differs sharply from single-nation imperialism in its forms of exploitation. The older style of imperialism was concerned to maintain a distance from the exploited object, thus favouring a degree of regional autonomy: through rule by governor, for example. By contrast, multinational capitalism seeks to interpenetrate the object thoroughly, to merge with it, to finally absorb the exploited object, so that the multinational framework as a whole is altered but at the cost of the elimination of the distinctiveness of the object; modern telecommunications have also made more direct control and influence possible between the exploited territory and the country that is the nominal origin of the expansionist drive.

Imperialism thus sought to extract the resources, human and material from the host country, to be processed at home; multinationalism takes the processes to the host country in the form of Free Trade Zones and investment capital - this is the significance of the "Made in Taiwan" label, as well as one of the reasons for the massive shift of Japanese industry into

South-East Asia during the sixties and seventies. An important shift thus takes place: the country now has very little strategic value in itself, as it did with Imperialism, but enters a field of relational strategic imperatives, both with regard to its neighbours and to the multinational matrix as a whole; patterns of influence are no longer described by the domino theory (linear, causative and with effects limited to a region), but by a field that is heterogenous, associational and capable of imparting repercussions over the whole globe.[23]

The most important change is perhaps in the modes of influence used by the respective types of capitalism, and by the way in which these modes are perceived. The methods employed by Imperialism were primarily political and military, related to the actual possession of the territory concerned; while there were, of course, cultural inscriptions and implications that underlay these actions, they were generally not capable of exercising power independently of military and political force. Multinationalism, supported by the blurring of the distinction between fields such as culture and politics, often employs culture as its main weapon, aided by the establishment of a global communications network; the barrage of cheap US image-products, is thus both a giant advertisement to copy the lifestyles that are portrayed and an attempt to displace the cultural products of the host culture, until it is entirely described and inscribed by US cultural forms. The paradoxical corollary of the use of culture as a weapon in capitalist exploitation is that military and political intervention, when it occurs, is more unrestrained, and less modified by cultural "moral" qualms: the US in Grenada and Nicaragua, Israel in Lebanon, Britain in the Falklands, Russia in Afghanistan, France in New Caledonia...[24]

Conrad's text indirectly points toward the multinational phase of capitalism in that the journey up the river is characterised by a decline in the mechanisms of imperialist economic control which paradoxically

enables Kurtz to exploit his object more fully - by tending toward becoming one with the object. In Apocalypse Now, the journey up the river is paralleled by increasingly erratic displays of military and ideological control; the need to "control" and "win" becomes de-stabilised, lacking an object with which to associate the terms, and the domain of Colonel Kurtz is something approaching a domain of "pure" desire and power.

The layered narrative situation that we get in Conrad's text is missing in Coppola's. Marlowe tells his story of the journey up the Amazon to a group of undifferentiated individuals, barely present in anything more substantial than the role of listener, on board a yacht drifting at anchor as they wait for the tide to turn. The narrator is one of these listeners so we are at two removes from Marlowe's story - assuming it is the truth. Whereas narration is the substance of Conrad's novel, narration in the film breaks down almost entirely. The film's voice-over puts us in the position of Marlowe's faceless, drifting listeners, reinforcing our passivity before the averted face of the visual image. There is, of course, a continuum imposed by the camera, but although the film starts off with a story, somewhere along the river this becomes less important and the film becomes a journey through a series of images. Along the river the hero consults an official dossier and we are given glimpses of an assortment of written and photographic textual images of Kurtz. In Conrad's text Marlowe becomes consumed with a desire to hear Kurtz speak, and when he finally meets Kurtz, he encounters a shadow that is indeed little more than a voice. But if Conrad presents us with a narrative voice's quest for voice, what we get in the film is an imagaic quest for image. Both Sheen and Brando exhibit typical method acting performances; their speech is supposed to be "realistic" and is therefore often garbled, inarticulate and often nearly inaudible. Brando's in particular is as blurred and insubstantial as his voice. We seem to enter a field of "pure" image, just as Kurtz'

methods represent the application of a "pure" power and will. Neither is pure of course, the purity of the will-power is its formlessness, its chaotic absence of meaning, its horror. In the same way, the focus of the last part of the film is literally on the fragmented formlessness of Kurtz rather than on his fuzzy philosophising - on the way the light strikes his bald head, his eyes and lips shining in the dark, the hazy silhouette of him reading "The Hollow Men". When Kurtz is dead we have an image of him saying "the horror" but no idea of what the horror might be, in the same way that in Conrad we get not "the horror" but Marlowe's narration of it, as he speculates on what it was Kurtz saw in those dying moments.

So what is Coppola's Heart of Darkness? It seems significant that in the film, Sheen is sent up the river not to bring Kurtz back, as in the book, but to kill him; what is at issue are not Kurtz's methods (the blasting of the village at the beginning testifies to that) but the lack of control that the US military has over him. Vietnam is no longer an exercise in control for military, economic and political purposes, but has evolved into the exercise of power for its own sake - firepower, communications power, manpower...the next stage in capitalism?[25] In Conrad's text, Marlowe returns to "the World", but in Coppola's film we are treated to the sight of exploding napalm - a comment on the seductive beauty of destructive images but also an indication of the degree to which American culture remains trapped in Vietnam, trapped by its images. There is also an important link with the title which is deliberately hyperbolic and points to the way in which Western culture has moved beyond the modernist ideal of the transformative value of periodic crises, to a state that approaches an existence that treats of itself as perpetual crisis.[26] In the texts of Conrad and Coppola the heart of darkness is not something that Kurtz happens to stumble across in the jungle, it is the result in each case of the transformation of specific modes of capitalism that he

takes in there with him, within a context in which the potential for exploitation is radically unrestrained.

It is a long way from Apocalypse Now to Rambo: First Blood Part II. The latter film was enormously successful, obviously striking a responsive chord with audiences, particularly in the US but also in this country. The film has also been reviled by many groups for its violence, its casual brutality and its single-handed resurrection of a macho ethos. For many, the film, and Rambo Stallone, have comes to stand as symbols of a new American political and military aggressiveness. This is not accidental as the film obviously tapped into an emotional need in Americans, but in combination with a reactionary political situation, raised that need to the level of rhetoric. The importance of Rambo for this discussion lies in the fact that, like it or not, it helped to pave the way for Platoon and Full Metal Jacket - the same cultural climate that manufactured the one, produced the other.

The film, directed by someone appropriately named George P. Comatos(e?) is completely unrealistic but uses a type of fantasy that passes for realism; a product-image in which people believe and with which they identify, not because it corresponds to "lived" experience, but because it corresponds to the way TV reality looks. The film is structured like a cartoon yet presents this structure in a "realistic" way. Rambo, a Vietnam Vet, is sent back into Vietnam to rescue American POW's - to symbolically retrieve America's memory of its past sacrifices; also, one suspects, to remove some of the messy evidence of its involvement. But this flimsy plot-line is really only an excuse for Stallone to single-handedly depopulate the whole of South-East Asia. The whole film is a massive show of physical and ideological muscle-flexing - all except for one tender moment between Rambo and his subservient Vietnamese woman helper (who can't

make up her mind whether to speak colloquial American very well or very badly). The audience is left with a warm feeling for about 15 seconds before the woman is turned into a colander by a nasty gook ambush, and 10 armed men, proving no match for an enraged Rambo, are turned into hamburger.

Yet Rambo is not so much escapist entertainment as direct, moral instruction, and in this it preserves the link with the disaster and sci-fi films. Its uncomplicated structure reflects its yearning for a world that is morally simple, unambiguous, with a strict us or them confrontational attitude. So naturally the Vietnamese are only subservient puppets for Russians with close-cropped hair and cold-grey eyes. The film also attempts to set up a confrontation between man and technology - sophisticated computers on the one hand and muscle-bound Stallone on the other - this despite Rambo's liberal use of helicopters, rocket-launchers, and explosives, and the fact that the film champions death and destruction on a scale that only mechanisation makes possible. The real confrontation is between those for whom Vietnam "meant" something and those for whom it was merely bad press for America. This panders to the belief held by many Americans and by certain sectors of the US military that the war was lost by the politicians and bureaucrats back in Washington; after all, with a few more men like Rambo running loose there wouldn't be a Vietnam, and therefore no problem. But the "stinking bureaucrats", concerned only with men as financial symbols, turned the war into a lie - while the average American was over there fighting for King and Country, the bureaucrats were back home feathering their own nests and stirring up hatred against returning Vets.

Rambo arrived in the midst of a media environment which had slowly, almost osmotically been incorporating elements of a Vietnam identity without any real discussion concerning those elements. This was the time

when every second TV show or film seemed to have a character that was a Vet, an implicit acknowledgement that a large number of Americans had fought there, even as niggling rumours of Vet's readjustment problems began to surface. But the portrayal of Vets was limited to murderous psychopaths, or characters whose Vietnam experience gave them an excuse to react violently to confrontational situations: cops, private detectives, truck drivers (BJ and the Bear) and so on. Rambo is thus operating on stable ground by using the stereotype of the violent Vet; similarly the issue of US military personnel missing in action has remained an emotive and politically "safe" issue which does not necessitate any discussion on the actual US involvement in Vietnam.

The film is answering the need of those who felt that the US had become soft and morally flabby during the seventies. It urges an aggressive military stance toward America's enemies and sets out to champion a type of US individualism that has ever existed only in myth. Thus, when Rambo is given his assignment, he asks his commanding officer, "Do we get to win this time?" and the answer is "It's up to you". This is an appeal to the belief that the individual can make a difference, but it requires a cultural blindness of an almost unbelievable degree. It carries further nasty overtones of a willingness to re-write history to suit present purposes, to freeze change, to reinforce the status quo. Rambo returns from his mission and symbolically machine-guns the array of computers that was set up to monitor his operation, proving that he's no slave to technology.

This unwillingness to deal with the historical specificity of the US' involvement in Vietnam is important because it is something that characterises most of the current wave of Vietnam films. In Rambo, the US soldiers are not really being rescued from Vietnam, but from an extremely idealised, American view of the whole experience; they are being rescued

from America's forgetfulness, brought back to its consciousness in all their glory. Hence Rambo's instructions to the bureaucrat at the end of the film: "You know there are more men out there, you know where they are. Now find them or I'll find you." This is less an appeal for a CIA mission into Vietnam, than it is a demand that Vietnam be remembered. This is made obvious at the end when Rambo is asked, "What do you want?" Having managed most of the film with monosyllables, he gathers his mental resources and in a syntactically tortured, and obviously physically painful effort at speech Stallone replies: "I want (pause) what every other guy (pause) who came over here and spilled his guts (pause) wants. (pause) For our country to love us (pause - facial twitch complements palpitation of the left pectoral) as much as we love (pause) it."

Of course it is not as simple as this. The film asks that the Vets be remembered, but demands that this remembrance take place in a context where the war in Vietnam is remembered as a worthy struggle against the forces of darkness, rather than a military debacle of near genocidal proportions. At the same time it posits a denial of history through its attempt to turn back the clock to a period before Vietnam: a period of perceived moral simplicity where the good and the bad were clearly visible, where the US was a nation working in concert, where a man could be a man without fear of losing his humanity in a vast array of technological process and communications complexity. As with the disaster and sci-fi films, the fascist appeal that is inherent in the cult of the spectacle is exploited through being co-joined with a conservative politics. Yet the reactionary posture of this film was certainly in tune with its time and played a large part in promoting an acceptance of Vietnam as a topic of discussion.[27] But the question is: is subsequent discussion taking place only within the type of ideological framework set up by Rambo?

John Stevenson, in a review of the second wave of Vietnam films, is correct when he says that although these fantasy-revenge films may appeal to a large section of the population due to their comic-book realism, in cultural terms they are soon perceived as insubstantial.

> But such obvious fantasies - much like the early Hollywood efforts in World War II, with their cardboard feats of derring-do - fail to satisfy many for very long. In addition (and rather similarly), the trumpeting chauvinism and accompanying military adventures of the Reagan administration have aged badly. The contemptible token victories of the Grenada and Libya raids can't hide the miscarriage of imperialist ambition in the Middle East and Central America. These failures of the promised easy fix have generated a need for a more realistic look at Vietnam, that fulcrum of America's recent understanding of itself - or at least a more realistic-looking portrayal of the war there.[28]

Stevenson's reasoning however, is perhaps the reverse of the actual process. Libya and Grenada were not seen as contemptible token victories by the majority of Americans, and Grenada in particular certainly aided in the re-election of Reagan over a year later. Stevenson suggests that the Vietnam films were invoked to compensate for the miscarriage of imperialist ambition, but it would seem that the climate for these films was created by what were ultimately seen as successful incidences of US intervention. The new wave of Vietnam films thus reflects a return of confidence in the US ability to create a more sophisticated mythic version of its past.

The films Platoon and Full Metal Jacket are probably the most influential films on Vietnam but they do not represent a meaningful discussion of the experience as much as an appeal to the notion of spectacle. Both films are couched within pretty conventional narrative structures, which lack the self-consciousness of Coppola's use of Heart of Darkness. In Platoon the narrative is quite obviously the battle for the young man's soul with all the conventional associations of a loss of innocence; even the presence of good and evil angels. As Stevenson points out, this is an extremely simplistic view of the US involvement in Vietnam.

> There is something narrow about viewing Vietnam simply as a testing ground for the American soul, about seeing the war only in terms of what Vietnam did to America rather than what America did to Vietnam and what the Vietnam war meant on the stage of world history. And there's something very narrow about a representation of good in the person of simply a good officer like Sgt. Elias, a character whose virtues are chiefly the traditional military merits of bravery under fire, concern for the men's welfare, and respect for the rights of noncombatants.[29]

The "hero" (Charlie Sheen) even gets wounded in the groin - a Hemingway wound - which recalls an older, traditional attitude to war, sacrifice and virility, but not in such a way as to make us question these assumptions. This is symptomatic of the way in which all of the second wave of films "accept the basic terms set by the American military presence in Vietnam, and draw out their drama of character and moral conflicts within those parameters".[30] In contrast with the situation that prevailed during the sixties, the military's has become accepted as the official version: Vietnam is seen as just another war, at best as a noble crusade.

Full Metal Jacket is a swept-up, fragmented version of one of the oldest war narratives - from boot camp to the front. At least one half of this traditionalism is successfully undermined however, and the film deconstructs what is supposedly a constructive process, revealing the assumptions upon which military training is based. Paris Island is shown as an arena of brutal dehumanisation, an exercise in character assassination rather than character building, where the men's conditioning is mental as much as physical. It consists of taking attitudes towards sex and women, many of these already demeaning, misogynist, and aggressive, and re-attaching them to figures of violence associated with war and killing. Thus the men are marched around the barracks simultaneously hefting their rifles and their genitals and chanting: "This is my rifle, this is my gun! This is for fighting, this is for fun!" They are also made to sleep with their rifles and to chant while running: "I don't want no

teenage queen, all I want's my M-14". The instructor continually demeans their sexuality, charges everything with sexual connotation - his idea of a compliment is: "I like you. You can come over and fuck my sister." - finally instructing the future soldiers that "God has a hardon for Marines because we kill everything we see. And in return for this power we keep Heaven supplied with fresh souls". It is impossible for the men to identify with each other, or for us to identify with them. The plight of Private Pyle shows that clumsy, unfit, sluggish men - "disgusting fat bodies" in the words of the DI - do not become likeable figures of fun like Gomer Pyle: they are destroyed.

The second half of the film does not impact as strongly as the first half. Stevenson argues that it turns into a "lessons of combat" film which exalts bravery under fire and other traditional military virtues. There is, for example, the neanderthal "Animal Mother", a massive redneck who is perfectly in tune with his role as an efficient killing machine. On reflection one may feel some horror at this; nevertheless, while watching the film the viewer is drawn into the combat context, and "Animal Mother" comes across as being virtually lionized.

Yet the second half of the film follows on from the first by showing the results of the men's training in a combat situation. In particular, the association between sex and violence has become almost habitual in the way the men view the war. Thus it is hardly insignificant that the second half of the film opens with Joker and Rafterman negotiating with a Vietnamese prostitute. This sexual element also saturates the language: Joker, during the attack on Danang says, "I hope they's just fuckin' with us"; the Captain asks for some low-angle shots of Anne-Margaret: "Don't make it too obvious, but I want to see fur and early morning dew"; the soldiers stand around a dead comrade talking about how he was repeatedly jerking off trying to get a section 8 "discharge". At one stage an ARVN

soldier brings a prostitute to service the troops, who make derisive comments alluding to South Vietnamese cowardice while gladly making use of the prostitute: it is a literal and figurative metaphor for the US "fucking over" Vietnamese culture. Most telling is the scene where Joker shoots the wounded VC woman in the face and one of the soldiers comments in horror/admiration: "Hardcore. Fucking hardcore". It is a pornographic moment where the male sexualism that reinforces the violence of war merges with the violence that underpins male attitudes toward sex and women: the woman on her back, begging the man to shoot her, pleading for release; the man/soldier standing over her with the power of life and death, his weapon in her face. Bang.

Yet this scene does not come across as the epiphany of Vietnam that Kubrick has said he intended.[31] It is almost impossible to see the VC woman as a victim knowing that it is her that we have just watched shoot apart, limb by limb and in brutally explicit slow motion, two of the men that we have come to identify with. When Joker shoots her, the audience is left thinking, not about the moral questions involved, but "Gee, they sure had to do some shitty things over there." This applies also to the sense of absurdity that the film cultivates. The final scene, where the soldiers march along silhouetted against the burning rubble of Hue, singing the Mickey Mouse Club theme song not only makes reference to the "Mickey Mouse" nature of the war, but is evocative as a moment of absurdity in its own right. But it also portrays "the essential disengagement of the Americans, who could see the war as spectacle (dangerous or horrific spectacle, often, but nonetheless something apart from the most concrete reality of their lives".[32]

The most problematic aspect of these films is that none of them are at all self-conscious about the contradictions involved in their status as a visual representation of Vietnam, and of their contribution to the media

spectacularisation of Vietnam. The last is especially surprising in Full Metal Jacket where the lead character is a journalist and Michael Herr co-wrote the screenplay (it appears there were some moves left for him after all). The film talks about the Media's distortion of events (significantly, only in relation to the armed forces' media) but obviously considers itself to be outside those distortions. All of the films seem to accept that any distortions that were imposed upon Vietnam were deliberate and ideological, rather than a product of the actual communications processes. Thus while much of the distortion was ideological, designed to mask the reality of what was happening through terms such as Rolling Thunder and Refugee Resettlement - a lot of it was ideological only in the sense that the belief that there was a "truth" to the Vietnam experience (a black and white reality that could be defined and described), was born from the same cultural climate as the military belief that the war could be reduced to an "us or them" situation where the moral superiority of technological advancement would prevail.

The lack of awareness that these films are part of the same media slush that helped to create "Vietnam as we know it" is troubling. There is, as Herr shows, a component of war that, whatever way you cut it, remains glamorous, heroic, romantic and spectacular. It is not enough to present a trained killer who enjoys it, like "Animal Mother" as a revolting human being: the site of him charging across a sea of rubble, firing his M-60 from the hip still looks heroic, in such a way as to make us forget the problematic aspects of this portrayal. The tendency of the visual image is thus to present the glamour of war only; however horrible the subject-matter, it remains fascinating in the way that all voyeurism is fascinating, spectacular, specular: we are outside events, nothing is hidden from us, we can impose meaning on any situation. This unproblematic approach to filmic representation is evident in the rest of the film.

While Kubrick may have made it impossible for us to identify with the characters in the first part of the film, in the second part, in order to try and convey the feeling of what it was like to be in Vietnam, and to build tension and suspense, he uses a lot of low-angle camera work: we are creeping through the ruins with the men, running with them, peering round corners with them; naturally we begin to identify with them and make judgements from within the combat context.

It is hard enough for film to undercut the reification inherent in the gaze of the camera: it is therefore offensive when this thrill-seeking aspect is exploited. An example of this occurs in Full Metal Jacket where men are blown away in a slow motion style similar to that of Peckinpah, with seemingly impossible amounts of blood splattering everywhere - a gratuitous and completely sensational indulgence in the spectacle of violent death. There is a sense in which this balletic portrayal of death can, if we think about it, reveal to us our fascination with the spectacle of violent death, in the same way that turning extreme violence into comic opera through the use of music in A Clockwork Orange raises the problem of the subjective nature of violence. But in both cases there is also failure, simply because there is no attempt made to acknowledge the empowering function of the camera; the way in which these Kubrick films legitimise our fascination with watching violence.

It is not that these films are deliberately pro-war; rather they are cast in the mould of a traditional anti-war film which is no longer, and perhaps never was, relevant. A traditional anti-war film, like All Quiet on the Western Front or Hell is for Heroes argues that war is inhuman, it is barbaric, brutal, typically not the values that we associate with civilized man. Thus anti-war films such as the above will attempt to inject some element of humanity into a war situation, by portraying social dislocation, or more commonly by focusing on an individual so we can see

war's effect as something more immediate than that which happens to a statistical abstraction. But the rub is this: when war is perceived as inhuman it is still literally in-human; values of barbarism etc., are not what we would prefer to regard as typically human but they are still recognisable as such. What is barbarous is always constituted in terms of what is regarded as human: one definition of humanity may countenance the killing of the wounded on the field of battle, another not. But war, especially as it has become more technological, reveals itself to be not inhuman but anti-human, and the difference is important. War is increasingly staged as a technological exercise and Vietnam is the best example to date. Men are subordinate to their functioning within a firepower unit, reduced to numbers in a communications package. What is important is the ability to deliver napalm with pin-point accuracy, to introduce and evacuate speedily, to drop a tonnage of explosives, to occupy map references: the best example is the Search and Destroy missions, which in practice were just the reverse - the one is inhuman, the other is anti-human because it puts technology before men.

This is implicit in the Vietnam films but is not dealt with as such. One has only to look at the titles: Platoon - the unit of military organisation as opposed to the men themselves; Full Metal Jacket - a type of bullet, the focus is thus on the killing technology; Hamburger Hill -the concentration is upon the place rather than the men who fought there. This last is a particularly interesting case: it is a reaction against the anti-human nature of the war (as represented in the naming of a hill according to its map height in metres - 907) at the same time as it acknowledges that anti-humanism (the hill now has a "human" reference, but one that shows how men were turned, quite literally, into hamburger by technology).

The photographic image of course seems to reinforce the human

perspective; it is what we see, and it places the human gaze in a privileged position. In fact the photographic image is anti-human, because it is only the mechanical reproducibility of its agent, the camera, that makes this sort of perception possible; the photograph reinforces our passivity in face of the superior reality of the technology. The Vietnam films seem to have an implicit awareness of the anti-human nature of the war and the power of the visual in glorifying certain aspects of the war and therefore perpetuating the fascination with it. An example is the way in which both Platoon and Full Metal Jacket, use a voice-over technique. Neither film requires it structurally, the spoken words are not essential to the progress or explanation of the action or the images; the voice-over is rather a qualifier, a reminder that there is a human element in the midst of all this mechanized death and destruction. But neither works in successful opposition to the power of the image or convinces us that human values actually matter in an environment such as Vietnam; indeed the use of the voice-over in Platoon verges on the cliched and trite.

The power of these films and their popularity stems from the fact that they are not presenting us with anything new, but rather with more perfect representations of that with which we are already familiar. The images of Vietnam are, like the idea itself, overdetermined - the choppers, the blown away bodies, the burning of villages, even the thousand yard stare, will all be familiar to the generation that lived through the TV coverage, and to the subsequent generation through the use of Vietnam images, almost furtively, in countless rock-videos and documentaries. There is nothing new to look at in these films, and although Hamburger Hill, for example, may perhaps be the most brutal and uncompromising view of combat of which film is capable, the images of combat are in themselves already familiar.

So what is the fascination that these films possess? It is not their realism, but something akin to a hyperrealism:

> unlike a typical representation which works via our faith in its realism, spectacle operates via our fascination with the hyperreal, with the "perfect" images that make us "whole" at the price of delusion, of submission. We become locked in its logic because spectacle effects the loss of the real and provides us with fetishistic images to deny or assuage that loss.[33]

The recent Vietnam films seem at first to be merely part of a tradition of "gritty realism" but their realism is dependent upon their ability to accurately re-present images with which we are already familiar. Thus what would normally be incongruous - people walking out of Platoon or Full Metal Jacket talking about how each film really gave you an idea of what it was like to be over there - is readily understandable in the context of a prior familiarity with a wide assortment of images from Vietnam. The films themselves are regarded as being somehow more real than the images contained in the television and magazine coverage of the actual war. This tendency to hyperrealise Vietnam may have been what Coppola was trying to undermine with the obvious spectacles of the Cavalry sweeping in to the attack playing Wagner, and the men surfing amidst bursting shells. But the other films rely heavily on simulacra to present us with the "realism" of the spectacle of Vietnam:

> the ruined city of Hue and the Vietnamese exteriors were built in a gasworks in Beckton, East London. Kubrick flew in 50 palm trees from Spain but the site - also used recently to film 1984 - was perfect. The same French architect who had built Hue had also built part of Beckton, and the results of German bombing in World War II were evident even before Kubrick's set designers went to work on the buildings to really ruin them.[34]

Kubrick's unproblematic approach to all of this is reflected in his statement: "Art, in my experience, imitates life. Life does not imitate art". One may have had an excuse for uttering this statement in the nineteenth century: not in the twentieth.

None of the films is finally as powerful as most of the books about Vietnam. Slow motion is, for instance, about as close as any of them come

to suggesting the altered states of perception/consciousness/conscience that many soldiers experienced. They rely instead on the spectacle of Vietnam, the familiarity we already possess with its images which enables us to submit to this new context of hyperrealism. The power of the image in these spectacles is certainly symptomatic of the process that helps to induce the "loss of the real". But maybe, as Foster suggests, this fascination with the power of destruction and the "truth" of the Vietnam experience, conceals an underlying fear of a lack of authority, a loss of reality and responsibility[35] - things that people like Herr experienced in Vietnam, saw when they returned to the World, and which are now being used to assuage our discovery of the magnitude of these losses. The US is not exorcising the ghost of Vietnam as much as appropriating it, entrenching its mythology more deeply. There are as yet no films exploring the Vietnamese (North or South) side of the story and these may be a long time coming. For this war has become "our" war in a peculiarly unsympathetic manner, that reserves its pity only for "our boys" who suffered and died "over there" - the films seem to expect that their mere discussion of Vietnam is enough to make up for the treatment of the Vets "back here". In spite of their many artistic accomplishments, these films, as with much of the whole Vietnam spectacle, raise the consciousness only to divert it, fuel our anger with horror only to dissipate it in spectacle.

CONCLUSION? SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Monuments and memorials tell us a great deal about a culture. This is because (and also despite the fact) they represent a point of forced cultural signification; they are de-signed to tell us something. They are intended less to represent people and/or events than to create the appearance of transparent screens through which we may glimpse the working out and through of the grand narrative of culture; to constitute a mythic moment that reflects back to the originary mythic values of the culture. This is particularly the case in the US where there exists such an elaborately crafted mythology of Foundation: the Pilgrims and then 150 years of irrelevancies until the Founding Fathers and the set of first principles that serve to constitute the Union - as if there had not existed thousands of years of aborigine settlement before this. Although monuments ostensibly recall the specificity of a moment or person, this is rather the very thing that remains absent, distorted and confined to a representation of cultural precepts. Monuments appear singular, yet they always rest on a number of foundations.

In addition to reinforcing a set of cultural values traditional monuments also reinforce modes of perceiving those values. In the US, the monuments to Lincoln, Jefferson and Washington help to cast in concrete the ideology of patriarchy, the idea that history is made by Great Men, benevolent Founding Fathers. These monuments are, like the Statue of Liberty, on a grand scale; it is not enough to view them, one must go inside them and experience them. We arrive once again at the appeal of fascism: to lose oneself in the spectacle at the same time as one confronts

the objective immutability of these objects; experiencing their grandeur in comparison with ones own reduced stature and transient presence.[1] Other types of monument seem to manifest an objective relationship to history, as well as the possibilities of transcending history: the names of the dead carved into an obelisk, a cairn, an archway, a portal, on the village green or in city centres reinforce our apartness, our detachments from their deaths while at the same time invoking religious associations and reverence, constituting them firmly in the past as an object of worship. Meanwhile the soldier on the pedestal looks out over a real or imaginatively real battlefield: he is objectively present before us at the same time as he literally rises above our plane and the plane of history.

Monuments and war memorials, from the town plaque to Mount Rushmore, have played an important role in the history of the US. They serve to constitute the pervasive singularity of the country's history, to give physical form to its logic and values. Their existence also defines the past as past, paradoxically creating an apartness from history by immersing people in it. Monuments are thus a way of representing US history at the same time as they constitute the past firmly as History. Yet after Vietnam this process failed almost entirely. There were no monuments to great battles or returning heroes; many towns refused to add the names of the dead to their existing war memorials and names that were added were often defaced or erased. To be sure, there was a political and ideological unwillingness to represent the war. Yet the war and the events that interacted with it also called into question, if not temporarily blocked, the process of representation. How could the war be incorporated with notions of bravery and heroism and the noble sacrifice of war, when not only the Vietnam war but the idea of war in general as an acceptable cultural phenomena had, at least temporarily, been destroyed for many people? How could Vietnam be reconciled with traditional US values when it

was these values that had been seen to be compromised? Permeating this discourse on Vietnam, largely unacknowledged but resulting in a vague sort of discomfort, was the notion that such ideas of direct representation were no longer tenable. The "credibility gap" was not just evidence of political duplicity and it did not go away after the US withdrawal from Vietnam. The term indicates, literally, a gap in belief itself, an absence that lurked inside the representations themselves - film, television, newspapers, novels - upon which knowledge of "the truth" depended. Vietnam and the sixties had shown that ideas of objective historical detachment and narrative coherence were now highly problematic; carrying with them the suspicion that it was adherence to these ideals that had resulted in the debacle in Vietnam in the first place.

Yet while trauma retains its absence, its blockage of meaning which is really a rupture, a destruction of context, it cannot halt representation, which inevitably manufactures a new context to replace the old. Too many men had fought in Vietnam and their demands for representation were directed not only at the government: US culture as a whole required symbols and a narrative in order to deal with the absence. The push for a Vietnam memorial was begun in 1979 by Jan Scruggs, a former Vet, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. A nationwide, jury-judged competition for the design of the memorial attracted 1421 entries; the contest and part of the memorial were funded by the Texas millionaire H. Ross Perot. The winning entry was that of a 21 year old art student, Maya Ling Lin.

The monument stirred up a great deal of controversy for Lin's design was not what many had expected.

> The memorial, whose walls are angled so that they point to the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, is designed to involve the viewer with both the Vietnam dead and American history. It appears as a rift in the earth, a long V-shaped wall of polished black granite, emerging from and receding back into the earth. From a distance it is impossible to make out the names carved on the 250ft of walls. But the

> closer you get, the more distinct the names and mirror-like the wall. You cannot in the end make out a name without also finding your own face - and usually the sky and clouds - reflected back.[2]

What is obvious is that the monument does not explicitly say anything about the aims of the war, the relationship of the Vietnam war to US cultural attitudes or its relationship to traditional attitudes toward war: it does not invoke "sacrifice" or "suffering" except by association in the mind of the viewer. This is art in the funerary tradition, like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington. The memorial by its orientation does involve the viewer in US history but does not say how. For example, does it's V-shape, pointing to both the Lincoln and Washington memorials suggest that Vietnam was the awful, but logical result of the progression of US history from its "founding" principles? Is it significant that Washington, a Founding Father, nevertheless counselled against foreign entanglements? Does the monument point to the fact that it was Lincoln who presided over another crisis in US history, but who also enlarged the power of the Executive branch of government in a way that directly benefitted LBJ in his ability to wage an undeclared war?

The monument eschews the colour white with all its conventional positive associations to suggest something darker about US history, but perhaps also about the fact of remembrance. From a distance the monument is a black absence, just as attempt based on assumptions of historical objectivity and distance, to find the "meaning" of Vietnam only reveal a greater relativism and absence of meaning. The Vietnam memorial is not elaborate, nor does it rise above its surroundings - except to sink back into them, reflecting, literally, the transience of the "transcendent" moment and its links to both evolution and decay. The memorial imposes its own sense of narrative upon the Vietnam war - by its existence it could hardly avoid doing otherwise - but it is a narrative that is singularly

flat and without significance. The walls are covered only with the names of the dead, the narrative sequence is the order of their death, each name pointing only to more names, following them around the wall until the observer is back where s/he started. Thus the monument represents the singularity of each death while losing it amidst the enormity of the 58,000 plus other dead.

The memorial also offers a profound disruption to notions of personal and historical objectivity: the mirror-like surface reflects the observer's face back at themselves. The meaning "in" the monument must be created by the observer, thus s/he is seen to be involved with his/her own history, exposed to a self-objectification that serves to indicate their culpability in the deaths of nearly 60,000 young men. It is not impossible to place other constructions upon the monument but one is then aware that they are the observer's constructions or cultural loadings. One could say: "So much suffering!" but this is a cultural linkage rather than a feature of the monument itself. The memorial proves itself fiercely resistant to interpretations other than that of the deaths of a lot of men. It ensures that we will obey the injunction to remember them, apart from the controversy of remembering for what it was that they died. Not surprisingly the wall has been the site of what amount to religious pilgrimages, allowing relatives and friends to find their own significance and personal meaning in the names. Like Confession, the memorial offers the satisfaction of an intensely private public spectacle.

However there have been many people, Vets in particular, who have criticised the monument. They argue that many of their comrades went to Vietnam and died for something and this fact is not acknowledged in the apoliticism of Lin's memorial. They argue that the men did suffer, did make sacrifices, and that to ignore this is not to remember them at all. As a result of the controversy, a second monument designed by Frederick

Hart, was built. It features a more conventional statue: three life-size soldiers, one black and two white, standing together in a mixture of camaraderie and exhaustion. Nicolaus Mills claims this is not a version of raising the flag on Iwo Jima:

> In a war of unheroic iconography - the ditch at My Lai, the burning of the village of Cam Ne, the evacuation of Saigon - Hart's statue captures the one value that sustained soldiers throughout Vietnam: loyalty to each other. Despite their muscularity and combat gear, Hart's three soldiers are not glorified and certainly not triumphant. They appear weighted down by the guns and ammunition they carry, and what comes through, as Hart himself has pointed out, are bonds of love "in the face of their aloneness and vulnerability".[3]

The problem with this is that it is precisely this aspect of war that appeals. It is no longer the guns and glory aspect that proves attractive but war seen as embodying a tragic vision - man being placed in existential extremity and being given the chance to overcome. The exhaustion and camaraderie were undoubtedly a part of the war, perhaps the only thing that gave it any meaning - for this reason they were also part of the appeal of the war, as most Vets testify.

The differences between these two memorials - their assumptions about narrative, the relationship of Vietnam to US history and traditional attitudes toward war and sacrifice, what they say, or can be made to say, about themselves as memorials - embody many of the contradictions of US culture, especially as it believes that it is possible to measure itself against the Vietnam experience.

> For if Lin's memorial asks whether we are prepared to honour those who died in Vietnam while refusing to honour the war they fought, Hart's statue raises a more immediate and human question: Are we prepared to honour those soldiers who survived Vietnam while refusing to honour the war they fought?[4]

The two memorials situate themselves in completely different relationships to US culture: Lin's recognises the problematic nature of that relationship

and tries to subvert it; Hart's statue lacks this awareness and is easily assimilated into a traditional discourse of intentions and rational facts where saying "Thank You" to the Vets also legitimises the war, rehabilitates it without learning anything from it. This type of discourse tells us nothing we do not already know but it possesses an enormous power in context.

> with challenges to the American empire from South Africa to Peru, from South Korea to Haiti; with US warships thrown at the Middle East again and again; with American and Soviet Ambitions bumping up against each other all over the globe and both proceeding with preparations for war; with the quickly suppressed revelation at the Iran-Contra hearings that one of North's activities had been to set up a plan for mass roundups of potentially rebellious elements and suspensions of freedom and speech and assembly in the case of a national emergency - with all this as the context for a reconsideration of the war in Vietnam, what faces us is not so much the danger of repeating that war, but of preparing the way for something far worse.[5]

The treatment of both memorials indicates that without iconography the US is lost in its attempt to interpret the past. This point is made in "graphic" fashion on the cover of TIME magazine's acknowledgement of the anniversary of the fall of Saigon: it features a portion of the memorial wall, with its litany of names, but it is superimposed over a rendering of the famous photograph of a helicopter evacuating people from the roof of a Saigon apartment building.[6] The images from Vietnam are no less problematic than they always were, but a cultural refusal to accept the challenge of representations such as those of Lin that question how the culture represents itself ensures that the US has very little chance of learning anything from its involvement in Indochina. A preference for iconolatory over iconoclasm has speeded Vietnam's unproblematic passage into cultural myth: familiarity breeds content.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION - FRAGGING

1. See "The Object of Post-Criticism", Gregory L. Ulmer, The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, Hal Foster (ed), (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985).

2. All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity, Marshall Berman, (London: Verso, 1983).

3. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", Frederic Jameson, New Left Review, 146 (July-August, 1984): 53-92.

4. This tripartite relationship is the basic expression of traditional notions of representation: the object is that which is represented, constituted as an alterity but recognisably so, inscribed with the forms and values of the position from which it is constituted; constituted thru an act of interpretation on the part of the subject; the audience is the recipient of the representation. The commodity circumvents this process; since it has no essence, no alterity other than its price - and thus is truly alien in the familiarity of its accessibility - it applies to all subject positions equally, therefore to none of them, entering into an unmediated relationship with the audience.

5. "The Ecstasy of Communication", Jean Baudrillard, in Foster, The Anti-Aesthetic.

6. Michael Herr, Dispatches, (London: Pan Books, 1978), p. 52.

7. Herr, p. 206.

8. Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, (New York: Harper and Rowe Publishers, 1982 (1966)).

9. Going After Cacciato, Tim O'Brien, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978).

10. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Port Townsend, Bay Press, 1983), p. 36; an early version of "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism".

11. Hal Foster, Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985), p. 4.

12. Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", p.87.

MENTIONED IN DISPATCHES

1. Michael Herr, Dispatches, (London: Pan Books, 1978).

2. Graham Greene, The Quiet American, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986, first published 1955); hereafter abbreviated in the text as QA.

3. In the sense that in physics one talks of the "moment" of a force: a moment of precarious balance, heavy with potential, neither stasis nor motion but rather a finely poised dynamism.

4. This is typified by the Frenchman from whom Fowler considers buying a bungalow, and who tries to sell the Englishman his collection of erotica. This rage for collection, turning what was once provocative evidence of energy and drive into mementoes of spent desires seems an appropriate metaphor for the old colonialism.

5. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", New Left Review, 146 (July-August, 1984): 53-92, p. 58.

6. "Maybe it was already over for us in Indochina when Alden Pyle's body washed up under the bridge at Dakao, his lungs all full of mud; maybe it caved in with Dien Bien Phu. But the first happened in a novel, and while the second happened on the ground it happened to the French, and Washington gave it no more substance than if Graham Greene had made it up too" (D, p. 46).

7. Image Music Text, Roland Barthes, trans. Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana, 1984), p. 19.

8. Barthes lists six procedures that play a part in generating connotation within the photo: Trick effects, Pose, Objects (their arrangement within the photo, or the selection of a photo which exhibits a desirable grouping), Photogenia (the "embellishing of the image through techniques of lighting, exposure, printing etc.), Aestheticism (composition or visual substance treated with deliberation either by the photographer or the editor) and Syntax (the effect of groupings of photos).

9. Barthes, p. 30.

10. In Barthes words, the image is pacified. "Truly traumatic photographs are rare, for in photography the trauma is wholly dependent on the certainty that the scene "really" happened: the photographer had to be there (the mythical definition of denotation). Assuming this (which, in fact, is already a denotation); the traumatic photograph...is the photograph about which there is nothing to say; the shock photo is by structure insignificant: no values, no knowledge, at the limit no verbal categorization can have a hold on the process instituting the signification" (Barthes, p. 30). But it would seem that truly traumatic photos are not only rare but impossible - a photo and its reader are never without a context and it is precisely the context that is lost in a traumatic situation.

11. An excellent critical treatment of these themes is provided by Peter Greenaway's film, The Draughtsman's Contract. While the privileging

of the visual sense is perhaps as old as humanity itself, many of our "present" ideas concerning the accuracy and truth of photographic and filmic representations are based on theories of perspective drawing that were generated in the Renaissance. If man and women were to reside at the centre of the Universe, then they had to control their surroundings, and one way of doing this was to be able to reproduce them exactly - this enabled them not only to freeze the mutability of the world, but also to generate a blueprint for its reproduction in other forms.

Sad to say, it doesn't work quite like this. The unfortunate hero of Greenaway's (A Zed and Two Noughts, Belly of an Architect) film is a 17th century draughtsman who is hired to draw the home of a prominent aristocrat while he is away. He agrees to do so in exchange for sexual favours from the lady of the house. The irony stems from his belief that he is completely in control - the contract is negotiated on his terms and he has absolute power to make sure the particular area of the house that he is drawing at the time, is arranged to his satisfaction and kept clear. He draws by viewing the scene through a rectangular "screen" divided into quadrants - he simply reproduces the scene quadrant by quadrant.

However, not only does his control gradually slip away (increasingly, the geometric perfection and order of the estate is subtly despoiled by dropped objects and altered situations) but he finds himself an unwilling participant in a conspiracy. The master of the house never returns and his body is later discovered in the river. The draughtsman is forced to negotiate a second contract with the daughter where he is to perform sexual favours for her; his drawings meanwhile are subject to a process of interpretation where a construction is placed upon them that shows the draughtsman as far from innocent. The draughtsman is finally blinded and then murdered. The film suggests in subtle ways that he has been the victim of a plot by the wife and daughter to overthrow the father - it is they who have subtly altered the scenes that he is sketching - and the metaphor finally turns full circle: the draughtsman has been "framed".

Greenaway's use of the camera strongly identifies it with notions of perspective (there are many shots where the drawing device frames the action and geometrical construction of the scenes is common) and the films is a savagely clever critique of notions of objectivity, origin, reproduction and control over representational content.

12. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication", The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985), pp. 130-31.

13. Pornography exploits this idea of the hidden. We call it "explicit", meaning that it says what it has to say, clearly, without circumlocution, holding nothing back, it doesn't imply, it states directly. In part pornography plays upon the assumption that sexuality has traditionally been repressed, our bodies have been hidden, and their unclothing is a revelation in every sense of the word.

14. Death and its relationship to both representation and the cult of the spectacle is explored in Don Delillo's White Noise, (New York: Viking, 1985).

15. James Webb, Fields of Fire, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 69.

16. An example of the arbitrary nature of this as well as its potential for linguistic slippage occurs in Dog Soldiers: "An image came to Converse's mind of the sheets of paper onto which the computers clacked out useful information for the conduct of the war. The prettiest were the ones which analyzed the loyalties and affiliations of country villages - these were known, with curious Shakespearean undertones, as Hamlet Evaluation Reports. The thought of Hamlet Evaluation Reports made Converse hungry. Each Friday the Vietnamese used them to wrap food in"; Robert Stone, Dog Soldiers, (London: Wyndham Publications, 1976), p. 28.

17. John M. Del Vecchio, The 13th Valley, (London: Sphere Books, 1983), p. 594.

18. This process is explored in the film Full Metal Jacket, see Chapter Four.

19. William Manchester, Goodbye Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War, (London: Michael Joseph, 1980).

20. A biography of Douglas McArthur, American Caesar, (Boston: Little,Brown and Co., 1978).

21. Manchester, Goodbye Darkness, p. 391.

22. Philip Caputo, A Rumour of War, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), p. 100.

23. See Douglas Kinnaid, "Vietnam Reconsidered: An Attitudinal Survey of US Army General Officers", Public Opinion Quarterly, 39: 445-56, 1975.

24. Daniel Hallin, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media", The Journal of Politics, 46: 2-24, 1984.

25. ibid, p. 13.

26. ibid, p. 22.

27. Lawrence Lichty and Murray Fromson, "Comparing Notes on Television's Coverage of the War", The Center Magazine, 12:5, 1979.

28. ibid, p. 46.

29. Jameson, p. 83.

30. When Bruce Springsteen uses Khe Sanh in a song its mythic status is assured.

31. Jameson, p. 92.

32. ibid, p. 71.

33. Recodings, p. 16-17.

34. Jameson, p. 92.

REVELATIONS - REVALUATIONS

1. "Is American Guilt Justified?" (Discussion), The Center Magazine, 12: 16-29, 1979, p. 27.

2. All the European countries had military observers in the US to study the Civil War, but most of them dismissed the war as having no relevance to European military situations. One also suspects that there was an unwillingness to admit that the savagery of the Civil War could ever be repeated within a European setting and a European frame of mind. Consequently, the military strategies of the European countries at the outbreak of WWI foresaw a short war characterised by high mobility, and a minimum of casualties because of this. This is not to suggest that the Americans were any more militarily prepared for World War I because they weren't, although their late entry into the war meant that they at least had a good picture of the nature of the war. But culturally they seem to have been more prepared because they lacked the specific sort of ideological blindness that the Europeans had aquired during the age of Empire.

3. A Rumour of War, Philip Caputo, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977); hereafter abbreviated in the text as RW.

4. Arguably these two remain the greatest, certainly the most widely read, war poets because they most vividly convey not only the shock of every generation that learns of the horrors of war, but also that sense of betrayal that comes from the disjuncture between what they believed not only themselves but also their culture to be, and what they discovered about both during wartime.

5. Walter H. Capps et al, The Center Magazine, 14: 14-28, 1981.

6. ibid, p. 15.

7. William P. Mahedy, The Center Magazine, 14: 14-28, p. 16. The writer is a former army chaplain and ordained catholic priest, and a Vet.

8. James Webb, Fields of Fire, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p.245.

9. Robert Stone, Dog Soldiers, (London: Wyndham Publications Ltd., 1976). The Conrad paradigm is also used in Coppola's film Apocalypse Now. For further discussion of the significance of Conrad see Chapter Four.

10. Going After Cacciato, Tim O'Brien, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978).

11. The 13th Valley, Robert Del Vecchio, (London: Sphere Books, 1982).

12. "A Limited Revulsion", Harry S. Ashmore, The Center Magazine, 11: 17-39, p.31.

13. Mahedy, p. 16.

14. This is a simplification but retains the dilemma that many people refused to deal with. The soldier is not actually in the service of the people, but in the service of the government which is supposed to be in the service of the people. Yet many people, either because they were unwilling to do so or prevented from so doing by a sense of powerlessness, took their anger and bitterness out on the soldiers rather than the government. Those who did attack the government often attacked only its personalities, rather than its institutions, and so felt free to attack the soldiers personally also.

15. O'Brien, pp. 160-61.

16. This idea of Vietnam as a testing ground for the American soul is presented in the film Platoon; see Chapter Four.

17. Stone, p. 185.

18. ibid, pp. 24-5.

19. Michael Herr, Dispatches, (London: Pan Books, 1978), p. 200.

20. "Vietnam, Consensus and the Belief Systems of American Leaders", World Politics, 32: 1-56, 1979; and "Does Where You Stand Depend on When You Were Born? The Impact of Generation on Post-Vietnam Foreign Policy Beliefs", Public Opinion Quarterly, 44: 1-22, 1980.

21. Holsti and Rosenau, World Politics, p. 56.

22. Daniel Hallin, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media", The Journal of Politics, 46: 2-24, 1984. For a more extensive discussion of Hallins article see p.

23. Richard Lau, Thad Brown and David Sears,"Self-Interest and Civilian Attitudes Toward the Vietnam War", Public Opinion Quarterly, 42: 464-83, 1978.

24. ibid, p. 469.

25. ibid, p. 481.

26. "Coming to Grips With Vietnam", John Wheeler, Foreign Affairs, 63: 747-58, 1985, p. 749.

27. The current discussion on Vietnam accepts as unproblematic that for a long period of time the US refused to talk about Vietnam, and that now it is talking about it and this is healthy. Yet just how long was this silence? After the peace of '73 and the substantial withdrawals of US troops that accompanied it, Vietnam was somewhat submerged as an issue because Watergate completely took over the national stage. Even

so, Vietnam was back in the news with the North's offensive in 1975. By 1978 films are being made about Vietnam and books and articles are starting to appear, although it is not until 82-83 that the culture as a whole really picks up on the issue, especially as far as PTSD is concerned; during this time however, there has been substantial coverage of the bloodbath in Laos, and the boat people. It says something about the US and its relationship to history and culture when three years, seven years at the outside is regarded as a long time. A long time certainly for those Vets suffering the strain of combat adaption, especially given the hostile treatment they received, but as a cultural silence it pales into insignificance beside the US refusal to face up to its treatment of the Indians and Mexicans.

28. Wheeler, p. 753.

29. ibid, p. 755.

30. ibid, p. 756.

31. ibid, p. 758.

32. See, for example, "Vietnam Reconsidered: An Attitudinal Survey of US Army General Officers", Douglas Kinnaid, Public Opinion Quarterly, 39: 445-56, 1975.

33. "Follow-Up: The Vietnam Experience and American Values", The Center Magazine, 11:6, 1978.

34. ibid, p. 59.

35. ibid, p. 61.

36. ibid, p. 65.

37. John R.Smith, Erwin R. Parson and Sarah H. Haley, "On Health and Disorder in Vietnam Veterans: An Invited Commentary", American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 53: 18-33, 1983, p. 32.

38. David Fromkin and James Chace, "What are the Lessons of Vietnam?, Foreign Affairs, 63: 722-46, 1985.

39. ibid, p. 734.

40. ibid, p. 736.

41. ibid, p. 746.

WE GOTTA GET OUTTA THIS PLACE...

1. Hal Foster, Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985), p 16.

2. Bernard Sharratt, "The Politics of the Popular? from Melodrama to Television", Performance and Politics in Popular Culture, ed. Louise

James and Bernard Sharratt, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

3. ibid, p. 283.

4. The low degree of reality possessed by film reflects the degree to which it seems to mirror reality, yet leaves us free to engage with it as film, to appropriate and interpret with greater freedom than if it were, for example a stage play, where the degree of reality and engagement is much higher.

5. Obviously it is not just economic variables that matter, as uncertainty and fluctuation is something that is also seen to affect a perceived overall quality of life. This is especially true of postwar culture with its emphasis upon keeping people in a perpetual state of feeling that they "need" something more.

6. Sharratt, p. 285.

7. This resort to violence as an outcome of frustrated desire is examined in Nathaniel West's The Day of the Locust.

8. See Don Delillo, White Noise, for a treatment of the relationship between spectacle, fascism and culture. In White Noise the family derives a sense of affirmation and collective strength from watching the TV together. On the other hand the Airborne Toxic Event unfolds as a TV spectacle that serves to heighten their sense of involvement but diminish the reality of the event.

9. A recent example is the film Fatal Attraction. Publicity played upon the AIDS panic in order to describe the film as presenting the dangers of casual sex in such a horrifying way that adultery, in particular, would become unfashionable. In fact the film is a nasty, if evocative combination of misogyny and cultural traditionalism. The traditional nuclear family is shown to be under attack from people who have no idea of sexual responsibility. But the guilty husband comes out of the film looking rather good as he is seen to be the victim of entrapment within the clutches of Alex, the possessive, neurotic nymphomaniac. The narrative shifts almost imperceptibly from being critical of the husband's belief that the involvement lasted only as long as the physical side of the affair, to being critical of Alex for not acting the same way. The violence of the sex helps to reinforce the image of Alex as the Black Widow, who seduces men, then attempts to devour them.

   As a single woman, it is the family that she sets out to destroy: attacking the family pet, abducting the child and finally assaulting the household and its female guardian. A Madame Butterfly motif runs through the film, of a woman wronged who kills herself for love, but Alex is not allowed to be seen like this. She mutilates, but cannot kill herself. Instead, she must be strangled by the husband, come back to life in a Friday 13th ending, only to be shot dead by the wife, who is presented always as the wronged victim, guardian of the famiy values, betrayed by her husband and threatened by the temptress. In this way the film helps to reinforce a fear of sexual promiscuity, plays upon it andfinally makes it safe by placing it within a traditional "family versus predatory virago" framework.

10. Nick Roddick, "Only the Stars Survive: Disaster Movies in the Seventies", Performance and Politics in Popular Drama, ed. Louis James and Bernard Sharratt, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

11. Roddick, p. 245.

12. ibid, p. 258.

13. ibid, p. 260.

14. This claim that the elite are already among us and are recognizeable by their uniform has one interesting exception: the collective is not led by soldiers in any of these films. Indeed, in Earthquake soldiers are portrayed in an extremely negative light in the form of a National Guard militiaman who uses his uniform to enable him to fulfill his psychopathic fantasies. It would seem then that Vietnam had engendered such an overwhelmingly negative image of soldiers that that uniform was not elgible for the position of super-hero. However, we saw in Chapter Three in John Wheeler's "Coming to Grips with Vietnam" that perhaps the societal perception of Vets is changing. Wheeler virtually says that Vietnam Vets represent the elite of the future; they are rising to greater social and political prominence as a result of the catastrophe of Vietnam - the elite are among us, no longer ashamed to wear their uniform.

15. John Pilger, "Why The Deer Hunter is a lie", New Statesman, 16 March, 1979.

16. ibid, p. 352.

17. ibid, p. 353.

18. John Shannon, "America Remembers Vietnam", Issues, 1 (April 1980): 12-13, p. 13.

19. Michael Herr, Dispatches, (London: Pan Books, 1978), p. 200.

20. Pauline Kael, 5001 Nights at the Movies, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), pp. 141-2.

21. Herr describes Saigon as "the folded petals of a poisonour flower, the poison history, fucked in its root no matter how far back you wanted to run your trace" (Dispatches, p. 41). That the corruption extends further back than merely the US presence is symbolised in The Deer Hunter by the fact that it is a Frenchman, a relic of an older colonial presence who organises the roulette games in Saigon.

22. It is interesting to note that we get a scene very similar to this one of Duvall's in Platoon, where Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger) strides through the centre of an ambush, encouraging his men as the rockets and bullets fly all around him - but there is no self-consciousness of the status of his actions as a screen clich and it remains merely another image in a long line of images of impervious heroism.

23. One sees this in the criticism of New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy by the US and certain European countries. The policy is seen to have very little direct strategic influence in itself, but concern is

expressed that its influence will spread to other countries whose importance in the strategic matrix is more immediate.

24 It is not that intervention has not always been a tool of foreign policy, just that now it is less restrained by considerations of "Balance of Power" etc. In this way the perpetrators of intervention are gambling with the new structure of international relations brought about by multinationalism. Forms like "Balance of Power" only worked when a particular country was perceived as having an intrinsic strategic value, to which causal results could be traced if that country were to be interfered with in an "unjustified" (determined, of course by convention) manner. A relational strategic structure, on the other hand, can be seen to be far more flexible, in that immediate implications, not being causally but associationally related, are less severe - this is evident in the degree to which the US, Soviet Union, France, Britian, etc, are usually given what amounts to little more than a slap on the hand (even economic sanctions cannot be sustained very long - as with those imposed on the USSR by the US in the wake of Afghanistan - because they are damaging and disruptive to the multinational matrix). The long term effects are, however, much more diffuse - the lasting enmity of the Nicaraguans, perhaps - and a given act of intervention, because its results are almost impossible to predict beforehand, may well have an unforseen effect on the whole relational structure that is catastrophic.

26 Interest in Conrad's text focuses on the lie that Marlowe tells Kurtz' fiancee when he arrives back in the World. It represents a subtle undercutting of the power of the voice that goes on throughout the text. Marlowe looks forward to hearing Kurtz speak, yet Kurtz is able to tell us nothing of significance; Marlowe speculates on the significance of "the horror" yet it remains only speculation; the lie inherent in the voice is doubly exposed when Marlowe lies to Kurtz's fiancee, and significantly lies about Kurtz' final words; there is also the implication that because of the narrative structure of the text, the whole thing may be a lie, a tall tale spun by Marlowe (and finally, by Conrad) to pass the time.

Where the power of the voice is undercut completely in the film in favour of the power of the image, the focus of interest is somewhat different. It is not a question of truth, but of power and motivation. Why doesn't Sheen join Kurtz in the end, like Colby, the other man who has been sent up the river to kill him? Sheen delays, and delays and finally butchers Kurtz with a machete in an explicit parallel with the killing of a sacred cow. Then there is the moment when Sheen stands on the steps of the temple, with all of Kurtz domain spread out before him - and chooses to leave it all behind. The moment is inscrutable, largely because the narration fails here and we have no idea why Sheen has acted the way he has. There is perhaps the implication that ritual, particularly the ritual of narrative (Sheen's "mission") has its own peculiar power. It may be also that the limit of will and power is to deny will and power, as Kurtz does in leaving Sheen alive to kill him, to become finally, one of the hollow men. But there is also the suggestion that Sheen being the highly trained, if vaguely psychotic, military machine that he is - we see this at the beginning of the film as he drunkenly exercises in his room, and the final killing of Kurtz is reminiscent of this - that the assassination of Kurtz is the exercise of power, death and control for its own sake,

thus replicating the terrible creeping logic of the military, perhaps indicating that nothing is beyond the domain of control for the sake of control.

26. Marshall Berman, All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity, (London: Verso, 1983).

27. Acceptance of a discussion on Vietnam was being prepared for in other ways. The Killing Fields brought the issue of the darker side of US involvement a step closer, yet keeping it still sufficiently distant. The film is not about Vietnam, but Cambodia, and all the Americans in the film seem to be pretty all right guys - and yet the film subtly indicates the culpability of the US in the agonies of the region.

28. John Stevenson, "Recent Vietnam Films", Enclitic, 10: 41-51, 1988, p. 43.

29. ibid, p. 46.

30. ibid, p. 47.

31 "It seems to me that the allegory of the whole war is suggested in the last encounter with the sniper...I think this scene says something comprehensive about the war, It shouldn't be necessary to paint it on a wall to make it overly clear", from Gordon Campbell, "Kubrick's War", Listener, October 17-23, 1987, p. 21.

32. Stevenson, p. 50.

33. Foster, Recodings, p. 8.

34. Campbell, p. 21.

35. The paranoia that seems to characterise Pynchon's Lot 49, for example.

CONCLUSION? SIGNS OF THE TIMES

1. These are, of course, monumental distortions, and the scale is such that a feel of the mask of absence creeps into the representation. Monuments and memorials can be very unsettling because they are usually very still places, and this is not always due to the reinforcement of silence in the face of traditional reverence. The sense that this is a frozen moment is very acute and the "weight" of representation and denial is overpowering. One is in the most public of places, yet there is an inscrutability that threatens both meaning and moment. That these men are dead, that the event is past, that these actions are unreadable in the context of a forced unreadability both abets the power of the monument and threatens to subvert it. In order to overwhelm us with spectacle, monuments must invoke the whole of history as their justification, and in spite of the singularity of focus, the enormity of the invocation threatens us with disquietude, Strange figures seem to peer around the back of Lincoln's chair.

2. Nicolaus Mills, "Architectural Politics: the Vietnam Memorial", Dissent, 31: 24-6, 1984, pp. 25-6.

3. ibid, p. 26.

4. ibid, p. 26.

5. John Stevenson, "Recent Vietnam Films", Enclitic, 10: 41-51, 1988, p. 43.

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